

OLDER AND WISER: B.C. advocate offers update

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B.C. Seniors Advocate Isobel Mackenzie speaks at Silver Harbour Seniors' Activity Centre Oct. 20. The event was presented by the Services to Seniors Coalition — North Shore. photo Cindy Goodman, North Shore News

Last month Isobel Mackenzie, B.C.'s seniors advocate, spoke to a group of seniors and service providers at Silver Harbour Seniors' Activity Centre.

The question on everyone's mind was has there been any action from government on her reports? It's early days yet, said Mackenzie, and her office will address that issue with government shortly. In other words, no. Obviously that's not what the group wanted to hear.

Mackenzie, who was appointed B.C.'s first seniors advocate in 2014, is clearly popular with seniors. Let's see what happens if she has to recommend to government that a program for seniors be scrapped or that the eligibility for a program be changed or, heaven forbid, income-tested. Her critics have suggested that right from the start her office has been muzzled. They reason that because the office of the Representative for Children and Youth is independent of government and the Office of the Seniors Advocate is not, that the advocate is unlikely to bite the hand that feeds her. Nonsense.

The seniors advocate is supposed to stir the pot a little - that's her job and I expect her to do it. to advocacy. That's not a criticism, just an observation and it doesn't mean she hasn't been busy.

The Office of the Seniors Advocate has issued six reports to date and more are in the works. The reports, which are available at seniorsadvocatebc.ca, speak for themselves. Mackenzie's recommendations are precise and doable. Some, like the ones designed to keep seniors at home longer, would save the government money. In a statement on the advocate's latest report titled, "Caregivers in Distress: More Respite Needed," Health Minister Terry Lake thanks the seniors advocate for her report and commits to examining the report closely.

In the same release we're advised that the government is looking for "fresh approaches" to the challenges of

caring for B.C.'s seniors. (Note to the minister: the Report references a program in Alberta that focused on seniors with highly complex care needs and has been shown to reduce hospital emergency room visits by almost 50 per cent).

Government staffers are currently "studying" all five of the previous reports from the advocate. We shouldn't be surprised by the lack of action here. A 2012 report, from the Office of the Ombudsperson titled, "The Best of Care: Getting it Right for Seniors in British Columbia (Part 2)," had 143 findings and made 176 recommendations to the government. Three years in and not much concrete action has been taken on that report either.

The difference, of course, is that the reports from the seniors advocate come from one of their own. The lack of action from the government may not be surprising but given all the fanfare around the appointment of the advocate it is disappointing. If the Minister of Health is not going to take advice from his own advocate then why appoint one in the first place?

Kudos to the B.C. government for appointing Mackenzie as Canada's first seniors advocate. Shame on them for hanging her out to dry.

The advocate has done her job. Now it's time for the government to do theirs.

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