



North Shore News Column.

Older & Wiser

By Tom Carney

New advocate's office to be a busy one

It's important to be your own champion

By Tom Carney, Special to North Shore News August 21, 2012

THE office of B.C.'s first seniors' advocate will be up and running by spring 2013.

The commitment to establish an Office of the Seniors' Advocate was a key component of the province's Seniors Action Plan announced last spring.

The Seniors' Action Plan followed closely on the heels of the release of the second report from the B.C. ombudsman on the care of B.C. seniors and committed the government to consult with seniors, their families, service providers and other organizations to help shape the future role of the seniors' advocate.

I attended one of the consultation sessions held in Vancouver in early June. There were perhaps two dozen people in attendance.

There is a wide divergence of opinion on what people want from a seniors' advocate and that was evident in our group. We agreed that the seniors' advocate should be an independent office reporting to the members of the legislative assembly and the public, not to one ministry, and that the advocate should have a broader mandate, encompassing not just health, but also transportation, housing, home and community care and other issues that affect seniors.

Questions around the criteria used to determine if the office should advocate for individual cases and the role of the seniors' advocate in supporting capable seniors who have support and informal advocates already in place prompted a lively discussion but not a consensus.

When someone suggested the office could be structured similar to the Office of the Representative for Children and Youth (RCY) in the province I began to pack up thinking we could go home early.

Unfortunately it's not quite that simple. The RCY advocates for approximately 12,000 children. In contrast a seniors' advocate will have to speak for B.C.'s almost 600,000 seniors.

About half of those attending the meeting were service providers or representatives from agencies that support seniors and the meeting took a decidedly different direction when we heard from seniors themselves.

Those who spoke wanted a place where seniors and their families could bring problems that needed resolution.

They wanted the office to be structured so that it would be able to hear and respond to individual complaints. And they wanted the issue of neglect and abuse to be a priority for action by the new seniors' advocate.

I happened to be seated at a table with a gentleman from West Vancouver. Before he left the meeting he leaned over and said to me, "I'm not sure where all of this is going, but maybe they should just make a start."

I couldn't agree more. But where should we begin? How about with ourselves. We need to learn how to become our own advocates. After all, you know yourself better than anyone else.

Granted not all of us can advocate for ourselves but many of us can.

We can learn to be proactive, develop a strong support network and be our own champion.

Now don't get me wrong, the establishment of an Office of the Seniors' Advocate is a good news story. The ombudsman's report on seniors told us that we need a more accessible, transparent and accountable approach to addressing the issues and interests of seniors in B.C.

I think a seniors' advocate can help us get there. But my own view is that the responsibility for looking after our own interests lies first and foremost with us and not with an agency of government.

Still, judging by the calls that come into our office and in talking with seniors in the community, I expect the Office of the Senior's Advocate to be very busy.

Tom Carney is the executive director of the Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society. Ideas for future columns are welcome. Contact him at 604-985-3852 or send an email to lions_view@telus.net.