



## North Shore News Column.

### Older & Wiser

By Tom Carney

## Seniors' advocates crying foul

### Province's \$25 wheelchair fee met with disapproval

By Tom Carney, Special to North Shore News June 23, 2013

IN introducing the Seniors' Healthy Living Framework and Secretariat in 2008, the Province stated that it was "committed to building the best system of support in Canada for our older citizens."

It claimed that in achieving that goal, British Columbia would become "the best place on earth for older people."

Actions speak louder than words.

Both Fraser and Vancouver Coastal Health authorities have announced that beginning Sept. 1, they will begin to charge seniors a \$25 a month maintenance fee for use of a wheelchair in a public extended care facility. The fee applies to seniors making free use of chairs that have been provided to the care facilities by patrons and donors.

Maintenance, as well as the use of the wheelchairs, used to be covered by the fee residents paid to the facility.

Fraser Health estimates that the new wheelchair tax will generate an additional \$100,000 in revenue for the organization.

The new policy has seniors' advocates crying foul. This isn't a case of seniors wanting to get something for nothing. Seniors in residential care already pay 80 per cent of their pre-tax income for their meals and accommodation. And it's not the case that seniors in care can afford to spend another \$300 a year for the use of a wheelchair. Most of the residents in long term-care facilities are female and we know that three out of every five females over the age of 65 in Metro Vancouver live in poverty.

The question posed by callers to our office is: Who comes up with an idea like this? We live for the most part in a caring and just society. We all believe that seniors should be treated with dignity and respect. And yet when it comes to making public policy decisions around the rights and needs of some of the most vulnerable members of our society we seem, more often than not, to miss the mark.

We could take a lesson here from the classroom. Kindergarten and primary grade teachers have been using what I call the helpful hurtful rule for years now. The idea here is to get the kids thinking about the consequences of their actions on their classmates.

Picture this: A group of kids are seated at the colouring table and someone snatches a red crayon out of another student's hand.

Activity at the table comes to a halt. The teacher brings the incident to the attention of the class and then asks the question. Was that a helpful or hurtful thing to do?

The kids know the answer. Restitution is made and the activity resumes.

It works the other way too. So, for instance, sharing a lunch with another student is acknowledged as a helpful thing to do.

Framing the question this way is a simple and effective way to teach kids about what is right and what is fair.

Let's apply this rule to some of the recent decisions made by those in charge of the seniors file. Was the decision by the federal Ministry of Finance to cancel the tax benefit of investing in income trusts helpful or hurtful to seniors? Was the decision by the Ministry of Justice and the Attorney General to replace a road test with the DriveAble program hurtful or helpful to seniors who wanted to maintain their driving privileges?

And finally, will the wheelchair maintenance fee be helpful or hurtful to low-income seniors living in care? Even the kindergarten kids could answer those questions correctly. Maybe it's time for some of our policy makers to go back to the classroom.

Tom Carney is the executive director of the Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society. Ideas for future columns are welcome. Contact him at 604985-3852 or send an email to [lions\\_view@telus.net](mailto:lions_view@telus.net).