

Inside this issue:

Upcoming ID Clinics 2

Gearing Up for Tax Season 4

Supporting Peer Support 6

Bowling for Workplace  
Fairness: the Workers'  
Justice Cup 7

## NEW YEAR, NEW RULES

### AN OVERVIEW OF RECENT CHANGES TO MSDPR POLICY

By *Thea McDonagh*

Last year the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction released British Columbia's first ever Poverty Reduction Strategy, TogetherBC. Following this, the Ministry has released a series of policy changes that may impact you if you are receiving provincial income assistance or disability benefits. The first policy changes were released in July of last year and were covered in issue 128 of the Taproot. This article will discuss the most recent changes, which took effect January 1, 2020.

#### APPLYING FOR ASSISTANCE

**Streamlined Application for Returning Clients:** Prior to January 1, people re-applying for assistance who had received benefits in the previous 3 months had access to a streamlined application process. This provision has now been expanded to include people who have been in receipt of benefits within the past 6 months, making it possible for more people to return to assistance quickly.

**End of the Two-Year Financial Independence Rule:** The Ministry has removed the requirement for individuals to have been employed for two consecutive years before they are eligible for assistance.

Together  
Against  
Poverty  
Society

#### FAMILY STATUS

**Definition of Spouse:** Advocates have long been calling for the Ministry to change their definition of "spouse" to more closely reflect the provincial *Family Law Act*. The Ministry has moved in this direction with the following changes:

*(See New Rules, page 2)*

T  
A  
P  
S

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(Cont'd from **New Rules**, page 1)

- They have increased the amount of time clients can live together before having their assistance reduced to the couples' rate from **3 months** to **12 months**.
- They are now providing the singles' assistance rate to married clients who have separated but are not yet divorced and are living in the same residence independently.

**Definition of Dependent Child:** Families where both parents receive Ministry benefits and share custody equally (50/50) are no longer required to have a court order or agreement filed in a court that outlines their custody arrangement, though they must still specify in writing which parent will receive the benefits for any children. In addition, the Ministry now recognizes situations where parents continue to reside together but are no longer living as spouses; these families also do not require a formal custody agreement.



#### SUPPLEMENTS

**Increased Supplements for Hardship Recipients:** The Ministry is now providing more opportunities for people on hardship assistance to access supplements. Hardship assistance recipients now have access to the following:

- diet and nutritional supplements
- natal and pre-natal shelter supplement
- tube feed supplement
- camp fee supplement
- denture supplement
- reconsideration and appeal supplement (for supplements only)
- Christmas supplement
- supplement for special care facilities:
  - ◇ clothing supplement for people in special care facilities
  - ◇ supplement for alcohol and drug treatment fees
  - ◇ transportation to alcohol and drug facilities supplement

**Crisis Supplement:** The limit for crisis supplements that are needed to pay for shelter costs (i.e. rent, hydro, etc.) has been increased up to the full monthly assistance amount from the previous limit of \$375. Under the new rules, a single person on income assistance could be eligible for a crisis supplement for shelter of \$760, provided they meet all the other eligibility criteria.

(See **New Rules**, page 3)

## UPCOMING ID CLINICS

Lost all your ID? Can't afford to replace it? These free ID clinics can help you apply for a new birth certificate or First Nations status card.

You must register first, which you can do at the clinic location at 9:00 a.m. on the day of the clinic. Clinics run from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. First come, first served.

- February 7, Central Library, 735 Broughton
- February 28, Our Place, 919 Pandora
- March 6, Central Library
- March 20, Our Place

(Cont'd from New Rules, page 2)

**Security and Pet Deposits:** The Ministry has removed the previous limit on the number of security deposits; clients may now access as many security deposits as they require. There is also now a new supplement for pet damage deposits and recipients can now request both a security deposit and pet deposit provided they meet the definition under the *Residential Tenancy Act*. Both these deposits are repayable.

#### ONGOING ELIGIBILITY

**Canada Pension Plan:** The Ministry is no longer requiring people to draw their Canada Pension Plan before they are 65 years old.

**Information and Verification:** The Ministry has ended the practice of automatically cutting clients off of assistance for failure to provide documentation if they are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Instead, they will reduce clients' benefits by \$25 per month until they can provide the requested information.

**Repayment of Debts:** When clients owe the Ministry money either due to an overpayment or repayable deposit, there is now a fixed repayment amount of \$10 per month, and only one type of ministry debt can be recovered at a time.

If you have questions about any of these changes, do not hesitate to contact TAPS and leave a message for one of our income assistance advocates. ■



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Joan Stiebel

## PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

TAPS has advocates who can help you apply for Person With Disabilities status (PWD) through the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction. TAPS can also help you with an appeal if you have been denied. Call us at 250-361-3521 for more information. If you are at the appeal stage, get in touch with us as soon as possible after receiving your letter of denial, and tell the receptionist you are calling about a disability denial.

## TAPS STAFF

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Income Assistance Legal  
Advocate

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**Caitlin Wright**  
Office Coordinator and  
Coordinator of the  
Volunteer Disability  
Advocacy Project

**On Leave**  
Stephen Portman

## FEDERAL DISABILITY

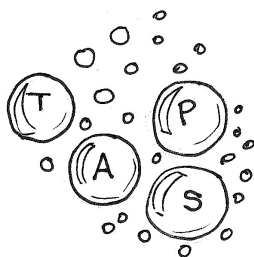
TAPS can help you with your reconsideration request and appeal if you have applied for CPP-Disability and been denied. We are not, at present, able to help with the CPP-Disability application itself.

If you would like to speak with an advocate, call 250-361-3521.

## VOLUNTEER AT TAPS!

**Come and volunteer  
on our busy front  
desk—  
a great way to  
participate in the  
fight against  
poverty!**

**Call Heidi  
at 250-361-3521**



## GEARING UP FOR TAX SEASON

*By Sharifa Riddett*

None of us looks forward to filing our taxes. Navigating the rules, forms, and information needed can be daunting. But, equally, it can be a relief when the task is done. In this article we look at what you need to know, what you need to have, and what help you can get as we head into tax season.

### **Why file my taxes if I have low or zero income?**

Even if you have no or very little income, and will therefore not likely owe the government any money, your taxes need to be filed in order to receive benefits and credit payments like the Canada Child Benefit (CCB), the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS), the GST/HST and BC Climate Action Tax Credit, and the Working Income Tax Benefit (WITB).

### **What information do I need to file my taxes?**

You will need to have all your T slips (T4, T5007, T5, T4A, T4A (P), T4A (OAS), T4E, T3, etc.), your Social Insurance Number, personal information like your address with postal code and your date of birth, T slips and birthdates of any dependents, and any other relevant documents.

### **How do I get missing T slip information?**

You should receive all your T slips, whether from employers or government agencies, by the end of February. If you have employment income, make sure your employer has your current address.

If you do not receive your T slips, you can get your T slip information by going in person to the Service Canada office at #450, 1150 Douglas Street (top floor of the Bay Centre, near the food court). Bring your ID with you.

You can contact Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) by phone at 1-800-959-8281. In order to verify your identity, the agent will ask for your SIN and date of birth, and will often want you to confirm the address the CRA has on file for you. They might also ask for information from a previous year's Notice of Assessment.

You can also write a letter to Canada Revenue Agency Tax Centre at PO Box 14001 Station Main, Winnipeg, R3C 3M3, requesting your T slip information. In the letter, provide your

*(See Tax, page 5)*

(Cont'd from Tax, page 4)

SIN, date of birth, address and signature. If you have moved since you last filed your income tax, you can ask the CRA to update your file with your new address.

Alternatively, you can set up an online account called "My Service Account" with Service Canada. You can open the account online or in person at a Service Canada office.

If you receive income assistance, Persons With Disabilities (PWD), or Workers Compensation Board (WCB) payments, you will receive a T5007 slip. If you do not receive this slip by the end of February, or you misplace it, you can request your T5007 information at the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction at 908 Pandora or by phone at 1-866-866-0800.

### What can TAPS do to help me with my taxes?

TAPS holds a tax clinic every Thursday. As long as you have a simple tax return, and meet the CRA's criteria for Community Volunteer Income Tax Programs (income below \$35,000 for singles and below \$45,000 for couples or families; no self-employment income) you can file your taxes at our tax clinic. We will be able to file tax returns for the year 2019 starting on February 24. During the peak of tax season (February

(See Tax, page 6)



## BECOME A TAPS MEMBER!

Want to support TAPS? Why not become a member! We are happy to waive the fee, so it doesn't have to cost you anything. You will get the Taproot mailed or e-mailed to you.

### Together Against Poverty Society Membership Registration 2020

**Together Against Poverty Society, 828 View Street, Victoria, BC, V8W 1K2**

Annual Membership Fees:  Unwaged \$5 (we are happy to waive this fee)

Waged \$20       Organization \$80

Method of payment:  Cash    Check    N/A

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_ Postal Code: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ e-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

I would like to join TAPS' mailing list to receive:  E-mails from TAPS about its work

Taproot—TAPS' newsletter

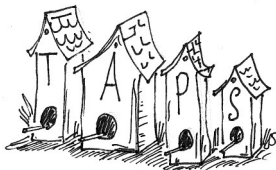
>>>  by e-mail       by postal mail

(Cont'd from Tax, Page 5)

24 until the end of April) our clinic runs from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., remaining open through the lunch hour. During this period, we will only e-file tax returns for the years 2018 and 2019.

If you need to file for years prior to 2018, we provide two options: those with PWD status can make an appointment with me, the tax coordinator. All others (including those on PWD) can drop their information off at TAPS for a tax prep volunteer to do on another day. Your taxes will be ready for pick up by the following Thursday (one week turnaround).

Aside from helping you file your tax returns, as the tax program coordinator I can help you phone or write a letter to the CRA asking for missing T slips or your latest Notice of Assessment, or updating your address. I can also help you file a T1 Adjustment if you want to adjust your taxes for a previous year, apply for taxpayer relief, or respond to requests for information from the CRA. If you want help with any of these, call TAPS and leave a message for Sharifa. ■



## Taproot Guest Column

# SUPPORTING PEER SUPPORT

By Ruth Spooner

The goals of addiction recovery and the maintenance of good mental health can only be achieved when those with first-hand experience are included. No one benefits from a system of strict separation between helping professionals and clients, who can suffer from all kinds of social isolation, marginalized to the edges of society where their wishes and preferences go unheeded. In 2013, the Mental Health Commission of Canada published “Guidelines for the Practice and Training of Peer Support,” the major ethical principle of which was recognizing the individual nature of recovery. One model will not fit all, and a program of trained volunteers who can share their hospital and street experiences, strengths and coping abilities, can be a key ingredient in people’s recovery and maintenance of health.

My interest in advancing a volunteer Peer Support program in Victoria rests on a commitment to self-determination. Nobody wants to feel railroaded through a medical system of hospital stays and doctors’ visits, multiple rounds of heavy medication, side effects and symptoms. When no one with both time and empathy is available to help a person already suffering cognitively navigate the income benefits system, keep stable housing, and manage personal relationships, outcomes suffer, costs increase, and people get more lost, frustrated and ill.

Peer Support is a great addictions and mental health support model, particularly when projects are properly funded and when volunteers are trained and supervised within a modest structural framework. Peers foster trust, respect, open communication and dignity through regular relationship building, fostering skills that atrophy under the pressures of a long and drawn-out illness.

Peers are already incorporated into several local non-profits that serve vulnerable populations in Victoria; the Assertive Community Treatment teams run by Island Health have two full-time Peer Support employees. However, there have been no training sessions or intakes for years and there is no direct route for anyone with lived experience who wants to make the connections. Mental health care in Victoria is inadequate, and more can and should be done to involve those with personal experience with mental illness in the solution. ■

# BOWLING FOR WORKPLACE FAIRNESS: THE WORKERS' JUSTICE CUP

*By Isabelle Dehler-Hyde*

Join TAPS for the second-ever Workers' Justice Cup on February 26 from 5:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. All proceeds go to our Employment Standards Legal Advocacy Project (ESLAP) to support not-yet-unionized workers fighting for justice and dignity in their workplaces. If you or your organization cares about workers' rights, this is an amazing opportunity to show your support while taking part in an epically fun event.

This exclusive evening is limited to just six teams. It begins with a team warm-up at the Victoria Event Centre, followed by a festive bus ride to Langford Lanes where the real fun begins. It will be an epic battle to try and win the title and cup from reigning WJC Champions, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 230.

Your ticket includes a free drink at the team warm-up, lane fees, shoe rentals, transportation to and from downtown, and food. At the time of publishing, there is one team spot left. For \$1500 you can register a full team of eight; for \$750 you can register a team of four. If you want to participate but are not able to organize a team, you can contact Isabelle to fill empty spots on other teams.

For more information or to reserve your spot, contact Isabelle at [isabelle@tapsbc.ca](mailto:isabelle@tapsbc.ca) or 250-361-3521. ■



*Participants in the Workers' Justice Cup event, 2019*

## BECOME A MONTHLY TAPS DONOR!

With your support, individuals and families living in poverty in our region will have access to critical legal advocacy and educational services. TAPS' services are unique in their design and delivery, and offer knowledge, empowerment and, in many cases, a new sense of hope.

Select a monthly amount that's affordable to you, and TAPS will automatically deduct it from your checking account each month. You'll never have to write a check, buy a stamp or find an envelope again.

Monthly donors receive the following benefits:

- Updates on TAPS programs
- Annual tax receipt for all your donations during the year
- Taproot delivered to your e-mail.

See the monthly donor form on page 8 of this newsletter.

## ABOUT TAPS

TAPS was established and registered as a society in 1989. We provide legal information and representation on issues relating to income assistance, provincial and federal disability benefits, residential tenancy, and employment standards to people in the Greater Victoria area. We also provide public legal education in these areas and on broader poverty issues.

You can reach us between 9:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m., Monday to Friday, by phone at 250-361-3521 or in person at 828 View Street. The office is closed daily for lunch between noon and 1:00 pm and is closed to walk-in clients on Monday and Friday mornings.

## TAPS IS FUNDED BY



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## Thank You for Supporting TAPS' Legal Advocacy!

The best way to support TAPS is by becoming a monthly donor! Please submit this form and your voided check to: Together Against Poverty Society, 828 View Street, Victoria, BC, V8W 1K2

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*Please debit my bank account (attach VOID cheque):*

\$10   \$25   \$35   \$50   \$100   Other amount \$\_\_\_\_\_ (please specify)

*I would like this donation debit to be processed through my account on the 25th of each month.*

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Donor Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_ Postal Code: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ e-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

This donation is made on behalf of:   an individual   a business

*A tax receipt for your total monthly donations will be sent to you at the end of the calendar year.*

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Taproot—TAPS' newsletter

>>>   by e-mail   by postal mail