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A TAXING SEASON

By Caitlin Wright

The Income Tax Project is one of TAPS' longest running programs. With a merry band of tax volunteers, training provided by the Canada Revenue Agency's Community Volunteer Income Tax Project and funding from Disability Alliance BC's Tax AID Program, it is also one of the busiest. The 2019 tax season was no exception.

Traditionally, we have run a tax clinic every Thursday, year-round (except August); countless clients line up both inside and outside our office, waiting their turn to meet with a tax volunteer, who will e-file their taxes that day. Thursdays have been a busy, sometimes hectic, day at TAPS, but we've been proud to be able to help low-income individuals and families file their taxes. Up-to-date tax filing is often critical to accessing much-needed income benefits (income and disability assistance, the Guaranteed Income Supplement, the Canada Child Benefit, GST/HST credits, amongst others) and tenancy supports (rental subsidies and social housing).

With the arrival of COVID-19 we were no longer able to run the tax clinic in its usual form. We shut down the in-person clinic late in March 2020, in accordance with provincial health recommendations, and moved to a predominantly phone and email service. Clients would

contact us, and our tax project coordinator would then schedule a phone appointment for them, either with her or with a tax volunteer. Coordinating the availability of the volunteers and clients proved very time-consuming.

Together
Against
Poverty
Society



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TAPS' AGM AND STRATEGIC PLAN

On December 10th TAPS held its first ever “virtual Annual General Meeting”. While it wasn’t the intimate event our members and volunteers usually enjoy, we were at least able to keep the tradition alive. As at past AGMs, a representative from each of our areas of work discussed the challenges and successes of the preceding 12 months, with this year the impact of the COVID pandemic on our clients and our work being a central theme.

We also elected four new members to TAPS’ Board of Directors, bringing the total number to 13. Here is a little bit about each of them:

Caroline Hudson has experience in communications, fundraising, event planning and board support. She has worked both with the provincial government and as a volunteer board member for community groups including Youth Empowerment Society and the Sooke Region Food Community Health Initiative Society.

Beth Aubrey is a social services professional with expertise in child and youth advocacy and equity- and inclusion-based initiatives. She has been part of the senior management team at the Victoria Native Friendship Centre, as well as working with the City of Victoria and the Aboriginal Coalition to End Homelessness, among other organizations.

Herbie Dick has expertise in community relations, public speaking, human resources and other forms of community building, with a focus on Vancouver Island Indigenous communities. His community work has included mobile outreach transportation with The Daily Dose Society.

Ruth Spooner has experience as a writer, researcher, peer supporter, and as a front desk volunteer for TAPS. Ruth was appointed to the board in the spring of 2020 and formally re-elected at this year’s AGM.

I am also happy to report that the members of the executive committee of TAPS’ board were re-elected to their positions, affirming the great work they have done over the last year. Patricia Cochran continues as President, Amy Bayliss as Vice-President, Nathan Cartwright as Treasurer, and Ryan Tonkin, the master of minutes, as Secretary. Linda Doctoroff, Felicity Smith, Malcolm Sword, Cathie Boies Parker, and Sandra Vincent continue as members-at-large.

Last but not least, both the board and staff were busy in October finalizing TAPS’ Strategic Plan for the period from fall 2020 to fall 2023. While re-committing to some of our hallmark goals, like delivering high quality legal representation and engaging in law reform, we have added some new initiatives, foremost among them the creation of policies relating to diversity in hiring and building community power. The full plan is on TAPS’ website: <https://www.tapsbc.ca/annual-reports-strategic-plan>.

*Doug King,
Executive Director*

(Cont'd from A Taxing Season, page 1)

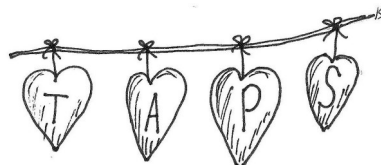
Throughout the spring, summer, and fall, we were inundated with requests for tax filing from individuals, housing and outreach agencies, and other social service organizations that were not able to continue their own tax programs during the pandemic. Every time the federal or provincial government announced a new income support benefit (such as the \$600 tax-free payment for people eligible for the Disability Tax Credit, or the BC Recovery Benefit) or we neared a new tax filing deadline, we received a surge in demand.

At the end of October, we shut down the tax program to retool our service delivery. Now, instead of phone or email appointments, we have switched to a fully drop-off system. Clients pick up the necessary intake and consent forms at TAPS, fill them out and drop them back off at our office, at which point they go into the queue for our tax volunteers to e-file. These modifications have lessened the demand on both our tax coordinator and on the front desk. As always, those who have their T slips in hand will have their tax returns filed more quickly than those who do not have their T slip information.

Late in January of this year, Canada Revenue Agency shut down its e-filing system to prepare for the upcoming tax season. For this reason, we have temporarily closed intake. We expect to resume service following February 22nd and to begin e-filing 2020 income taxes by the beginning of March. At that time, we will be able to e-file for the years 2017 to 2020; if you need to file for the years 2011 to 2016, contact TAPS sometime after June.

The same income limits are in effect as last year: \$35,000 for a single person and \$45,000 for couples or single parents (add \$2500 for each additional dependent). We are unable to file taxes for people who have a complicated tax situation, or are self-employed, declaring bankruptcy, or deceased.

It is always a good idea to file your taxes. Tax refunds, the GST rebate, and the child tax benefit can make a significant difference if you are living on a tight budget. And, as the past year has shown, having your taxes up to date is critical to getting emergency financial relief in unprecedented times. Although we are not able to conduct our regular in-person clinic, we look forward to helping all our long-time tax clients as well as any new folks who need their taxes done. ■



TAPS STAFF

Doug King

Executive Director

Izzy Dehler-Hyde

Employment Standards
Legal Advocate

Daniel Jackson

Staff Lawyer

Antonia Mah

Tenant Legal Advocate

Hannah Mang-Wooley

Tenant Legal Advocate

Thea McDonagh

Director of Advocacy and
Income Assistance Legal
Advocate

Irene McGee

Articling Lawyer

Madyson Powell

Income Assistance Legal
Advocate

Sharifa Riddett

Coordinator of the Tax
Project

Emily Rogers

Income Assistance Legal
Advocate

Caitlin Wright

Office Coordinator and
Coordinator of the
Volunteer Disability
Advocacy Project

Riley Vaskic

Intake Coordinator to the
TAPS Staff

Taproot artist: Joan Stiebel

A LETTER FROM MEEGAN: THE TRUST

By Bruce Livingstone

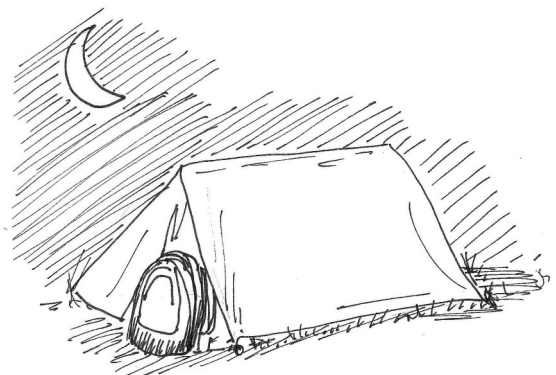
Concurrent health emergencies and Pacific fronts are tearing through our community as I write, and people are sleeping in tents in Meegan for neither *enjoyment* nor *recreation*. *Use* is the single remaining word from the oft-cited phrase, “for the use recreation and enjoyment of the public under the provisions of the Public Parks Act” (from the 1881 Act establishing Beacon Hill Park as a trust) that applies here. Is one word any use as a legal shield for literal survival during COVID-19? NIMBY voices clamour for an end to emergency sheltering in city parks, while without adequate housing Canada cannot uphold its human rights obligations to these refugees from myriad bubbles: from our half-to-fully-shuttered homeless shelters, public spaces and social agencies, from tiny home bubbles next door or further afield suddenly toxic and/or dangerously violent and/or in the wrong city, or evicted from a series of couches once a makeshift “home”.

Friends of Beacon Hill tried to join a July 2020 City of Victoria petition to the Supreme Court of BC, unsuccessfully, and have filed a lawsuit of their own against the city on the basis that sheltering in Beacon Hill Park for any reason breaks the terms of the Park Trust, in hopes that another judge will rule to preserve colonial privilege and tradition.

Military exercises were de rigueur during the Trust’s early days: guns at Finlayson Point and Mile Zero were supplied by a powder magazine built in the park close to where a tent recently went up in flames, the brick building removed only in 1904. Horse racing and cattle grazing continued for years in violation of an 1882 city bylaw. It hasn’t always been “bylaw as usual”. During World War I we erected some 20 buildings in the park (west of Heywood Avenue, covering five acres) to house the 143rd Battalion B.C. Bantams. If we’re going to have a health emergency or two maybe it’s time City Council reopened the Trust, if the Friends of Beacon Hill fail to break it in court.

“What if it were an earthquake?” is one of the most illuminating questions I’ve heard from a housed person understanding the absolute base human existence our homeless are enduring in plain sight, forbidden to cook, having their community tent and donated showers impounded in November, their tents set alight. She is one of many neighbours and allies who have found themselves at a weekly community-building all-welcome circle at Meegan, responding with compassion and sharing in countless generous ways during unpredictably frightening times. “The Red Cross would have tents up here,” she answered herself.

We call it “Meegan” as an act of reconciliation to honour the Lekwungen who gave it that name, meaning “warmed by the sun”. ■



POVERTY REDUCTION REPORT COINCIDES WITH WELFARE CUTS

By *Thea McDonagh*

On December 10th the province released its first annual report, “Together BC: British Columbia’s Poverty Reduction Strategy”. The report reviews the changes the government has made in the year since the Poverty Reduction Strategy was implemented and highlights improved access to income supports for British Columbians. Many of these changes have been called for by poverty advocates for years and it is heartening to see the government take action. Although these changes will make life easier for people living in poverty, they fall short of providing people with the financial support required to live with dignity. Sadly, British Columbians living in the deepest poverty only saw an increase of \$50 per month in 2019.

However, with the onset of the pandemic, income assistance recipients did experience some financial relief. As the federal government rolled out the Canada Emergency Response Benefit in April, BC announced a \$300 top-up to income and disability assistance to help alleviate the costs associated with COVID-19. Advocacy groups like “300 to Live”, a coalition of disabled and neurodivergent people, have called on government to make the increase permanent.

(See Poverty Reduction Report, 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 2021

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: _____

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(Cont'd from Poverty Reduction Report, page 5)

Unfortunately, within a week after releasing the annual report on the Poverty Reduction Strategy, the government announced that the COVID-19 supplement of \$300 would be cut in half.

This reduction came into effect in January, with people around the province seeing a decrease in assistance benefits. It is disheartening to see the government ignore calls to make the increase permanent and reduce the benefits available to the province's poorest residents in the midst of the ever-escalating public health crisis. Although people on provincial income support are having their support cut, other pandemic-related benefits such as the Canada Recovery Benefit will continue until September. It is increasingly clear that people living in poverty are subjected to a double-standard when it comes to being deserving of support and care during difficult times.

As the province prepares the new budget, municipal governments are adding their voices to advocacy groups and asking John Horgan to reinstate the \$300 increase to assistance rates. Although this increase will not raise people out of poverty, it will allow them to meet their most basic needs a little more comfortably and provide some security during these precarious times. ■

We did not produce a paper edition of Issue 136 of the Taproot. Articles are available to read on our website.

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.

HILARY

We are thrilled that long-time TAPS volunteer Hilary Marks was honoured in November with the inaugural Kim Manton Spirit Award in recognition of her outstanding contributions to volunteering and the community. The award was created by CUPE local 374 in honour of powerhouse union leader and community builder, Kim Manton, who passed away in 2020.

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.

POVERTY IN THE PANDEMIC

By Rough Blue

“It takes all of us”. It’s a term spread around by concerned people, media, and government representatives encouraging people to act wisely in an effort to reduce the spread of the pandemic. But the problem with coined terms is that the meanings get lost when they become too familiar. And now, as the term has spread faster than the pandemic itself, it’s a cliché.

The truth is, it takes all of us and more. It takes a change in thinking. No, it’s not easy. There is such a thing as pandemic fatigue. And while it might be forgivable to want to bend the rules, the act of bending the rules is increasing the spread of the pandemic. That is bad. And that is what’s happening. Hoping and waiting for the vaccine to come in like the cavalry to save the day isn’t realistic either. Each of us must act in accordance with the health guidelines to bring it about, or we won’t get a manageable grip on the pandemic.

And the pandemic’s ill effects are broader than the direct impact it has on the people who get sick. The pandemic is tipping the balance for those in insecure housing and insecure employment. It is adding more and greater stressors to those whose mental health had enough to deal with beforehand. It’s leading people to dire straits while the government well-wishers encourage us to “support local.” It’s simply not enough.

Had people had more support to begin with, that is, livable wages, job security, affordable housing, better mental health support, the community would have been better off generally, and better able to face the pandemic and its ripple effects. Not to say that these were being ignored—there are programs, institutions, and agencies working to reduce poverty and homelessness, and to deal with the problems associated with poor mental health—but they are underfunded, and even their best efforts could not treat the problem well enough before the pandemic, and certainly can’t now.

Maybe all these problems can’t be solved immediately, but aren’t Victoria, the province of BC, and Canada capable of a stronger, more concentrated effort? Hasn’t the pandemic brought to light that a better solution and more action are required? A change in thinking needs to take place in order for governments to adequately address poverty and its effects. It will be difficult and require funds, but it needs to happen now. At least it might lead to less despair, homelessness, and crime and to more cash in the community, support of local businesses, and parents being able to feed their kids better. While the rates of poverty and homelessness aren’t as dramatic and well publicized as COVID-19 rates, addressing the problem of poverty now will reap benefits later. ■

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.

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.

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

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