

It's Your Information: Exercise Your Right to Access It

By Candace Witkowskyj,
Income Assistance Advocate

Clients often come to Together Against Poverty Society unaware that they have a right to see all the information on their file with the Ministry of Housing and Social Development (MHSD). People do have a right to access their information, and in this article I will explain what to do to exercise

this right.

The information in your file may be helpful to you if you are applying for Person with Disability status or Person with Persistent Multiple Barriers status, or if you are filing a complaint against the MHSD. Medical information on file may help you access other services and supports. However, you do not need to provide a reason in order to access your file within a government ministry.

Under the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FIPPA), a law that protects your right to privacy and your right to access information, you are entitled to request all information on your file with



provincial government ministries and public agencies, including the MHSD, the Vancouver Island Health Authority (VIHA), the public school system, and generally any other public body you may have accessed as an individual. Usually the only information that may be withheld is information relating to another

(See Information, page 6)

Inside:

A National Housing Program *Page 2*

Volunteer Celebration *Page 3*

There But For Fortune *Page 4*

Prescription: End Poverty *Page 5*

Canada Needs a National Housing Program

By Geneva Hagen

Once upon a time, Canada had a national housing program. Funding was shared by the federal, provincial and municipal levels of government. But in the mid-1980s the federal government began to cut funding for social housing programs, and finally cancelled them completely. Most provinces and municipalities soon followed suit.

Homelessness immediately began to increase—at about the same rate as the number of housing units that would have been built, but now weren't.

In 1990, Paul Martin lamented: "The housing crisis is growing at an alarming rate and the government sits there and does nothing."

Martin co-authored "Finding Room," a report by the Liberal Task Force on Housing, which said:

"[H]ousing is a fundamental

human right...."

"The federal government has abandoned its responsibilities with regards to housing...."

"It is vital that the federal role in housing be strengthened...."

"The federal government's role would be that of a partner working with other levels of government, and private and public housing groups. But leadership must come from one source; and a national vision requires some national direction."

But after the 1993 election, Paul Martin abandoned his commitment to housing. As Finance Minister, he refused to fund any federal housing program, leaving Canada the only industrialized nation without one.

Within a decade, emergency shelters were overflowing. The United Nations expressed grave concern that "such a wealthy country as Canada has allowed the problem of homelessness and inadequate housing to grow to such proportions...."

Programs to end homelessness need not start with social workers, addiction rehab or mental health services. A study by New

Good-Bye, Katie

We at TAPS are very sad to be saying good-bye to Katie Tanigawa, who has been our wonderful volunteer disability advocacy program coordinator for the past eleven months. She guided the volunteer advocates with great care and kindness, and she worked with tireless devotion to help clients access benefits. Katie's dedication to social justice was an inspiration to all. As one of the volunteers who worked with her said: "She was awesome! She went above and beyond!" Best of luck in your new endeavours, Katie. We will miss you.

All of us at TAPS

York University that tracked hundreds of homeless families found that the best cure for homelessness is ... housing!

A 1998 Toronto survey found that substance abuse or mental illness are a factor in only about 20% of homelessness. Half of homeless women and children are fleeing family conflict and domestic violence. More than half of total homelessness is caused by job loss, eviction or inadequate income. Over a quarter of the homeless do have jobs—often full-time jobs. They just can't find affordable housing.

Poverty is expensive. Study after study has found that it costs society far less to house a person than to have them living on the

(See Housing Program, page 6)



A Celebration of Volunteers

The volunteers, staff, board and friends of TAPS all had a wonderful Christmas and holiday season party on December 12 at the James Bay New Horizons.

And this party was not cancelled by snow as it was last year!

It was fun to get together and talk about our common goals of advocating for our clients and working to end poverty.

Volunteers at TAPS are integral to the organization's success. We have volunteers answering telephones on the front desk, and volunteers advocating for clients applying for disability benefits. Volunteers help clients prepare their taxes, and they create posters, take photographs, and contribute their written words to the Taproot. All contribute in their own way to TAPS. All are appreciated.

We celebrated our good work

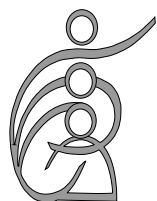


with a delicious turkey dinner with all the trimmings—and with vegetarian options, too. Some people very kindly donated special homemade dishes and desserts. One volunteer brought along a chocolate pie, a large piece of which I really enjoyed!

A special thank you to Heidi and Tricia for their excellent hard work in making the party such a success.

Thanks to all our volunteers for a wonderful year. If you are interested in becoming a volunteer in 2010, please contact TAPS at 250-361-3521 or by email at volunteers@tapsbc.ca.

*Joan McHardy,
President of TAPS*



Together Against
Poverty Society

Together Against Poverty Society

TAPROOT

Editing/Layout

Hilda Peters

Contributors

Geneva Hagen Joan McHardy

Tricia Roche G.R. Tomblin

Candace Witkowskyj

Illustrations

Joan Stiebel

Taproot is published bi-monthly by
Together Against Poverty Society.

Together Against Poverty Society



#302 - 895 Fort Street
Victoria, BC V8W 1H7
Phone 250-361-3521
Fax 250-361-3541
tapsbc@shaw.ca
www.tapsbc.ca

TAPS Board of Directors

President

Joan McHardy

Vice President

Robin Bassett

Secretary

Barbara Amberstone

Treasurer

Kris Constable

Members-at-large

Wendy Cox

Paul Dwyer

Rose Henry

Melanie Hudson

Noreen Marshall

Tim Richards

Patti Stockton

There But For Fortune

By G.R. Tomblin

Bob Nobuks carefully wrapped up three rolls of pennies, two of nickels, one of dimes. Most of that he had found over the past several months while sweeping up at Monster Mart. Wishing it were more, he dropped off the six elastic-bound rolls of coins at the Red Cross for the earthquake relief effort, where it was accepted with a smile. Bob was handed a receipt, which he stuffed in his pocket without a glance. And he hurried off to work through the drizzle-misted morning.

It was another slow Friday at Monster Mart—as had been every Friday for nearly a year, due to the recession. According to the politicians and the usual know-it-all “experts”, the recession was over and the economy was recovering. But as Bob worked his way along the endless curb, wielding his trusty broom and dustpan, he couldn't help but notice how empty the vast parking lot was—barely a third full. A year ago, the voracious maw which was the main entrance of Monster Mart had seemed to swallow and vomit gleeful shoppers in steady streams. Today, those same shoppers dribbled glumly in and out of the great mouth, which now seemed

frozen in a cash-starved howl of frustration.

As always, of course, Bob kept a sharp eye out for dropped coins, pens, cigarette lighters, batteries—anything useful. But these days very little bounty was to be found: a few pennies, the odd nickel or dime, once in a long while maybe a quarter. Even discarded batteries were rare. Pens and lighters were either crushed or didn't work.

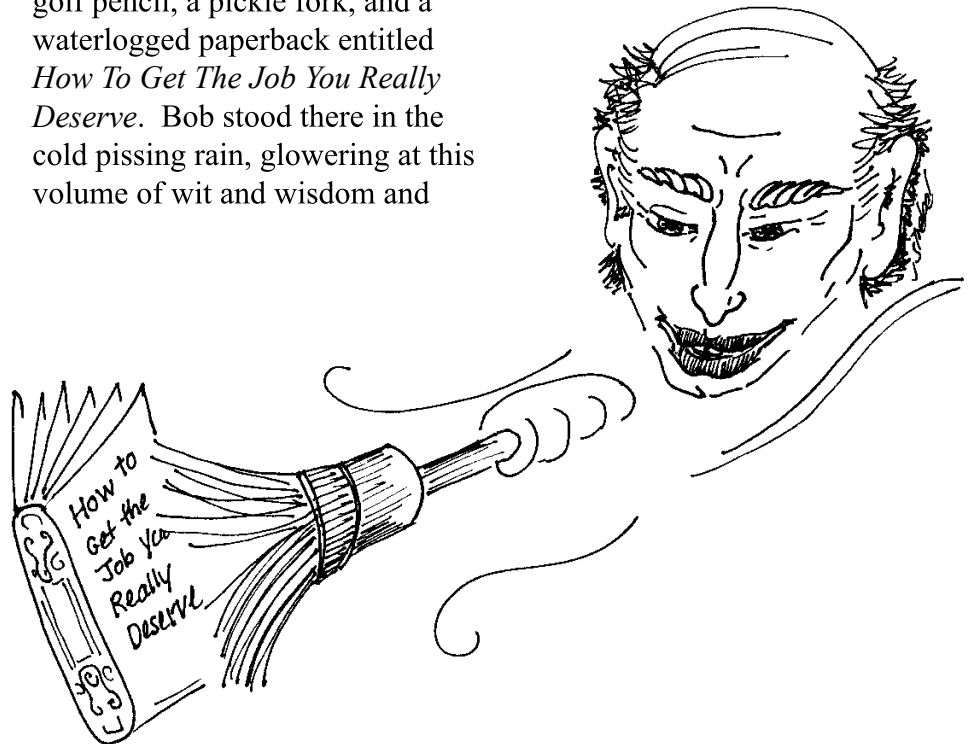
After nearly three hours of sweeping up litter—curiously, just as much as in better times—Bob had discovered nineteen cents, a thin roll of black electrical tape, a golf pencil, a pickle fork, and a waterlogged paperback entitled *How To Get The Job You Really Deserve*. Bob stood there in the cold pissing rain, glowering at this volume of wit and wisdom and

made a rude noise with his mouth. *Thanks, but I think I've attained that particular pinnacle of success already!* He dropped the book on the wet pavement and slap-shot it into his dustpan. Then he thought of the things he'd been watching on his 13-inch TV for the past week.

Immediately ashamed—*self-pitying little bastard!*—he carried on swiftly, envisioning further rolls of coins for the Red Cross or other relief agencies.

Finally his shift was over. He stowed his gear in the dusty sub-basement janitor's closet—noting the progress made by the spiders on their “websites”—and headed out. He briefly considered purchasing a nice, hot, greasy meal from the Fat-Burger next to Monster Mart. But after a mental review of his finances (or rather the lack of them) he decided

(See *Fortune*, page 5)



Persons With Disabilities

TAPS has advocates who can help you apply for Person With Disability status (PWD) through the Ministry of Housing and Social Development. TAPS can also help you with an appeal if you have applied and been denied. Call TAPS at 250-361-3521 for more information. If you are at the appeal stage, be sure to 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 appeal.

(From Fortune, page 4)

against it. Even that one bit of self-indulgence would make him feel guilty. Besides, the crap would be stone cold by the time he got home anyway.

Oh well, there was always the green lentils for a nice wholesome soup—and he had a potato and a carrot and half an onion to put in it, this time! Really, he was extremely lucky—compared to many, many people in this world.

Especially at this moment.

And when at last Bob was safe in his little room and had doffed his thin wet coat, he looked up at the cracked ceiling, around at the cracked walls, and wondered—*How would I fare if it happened here? Would I crack too?* ■

Prescription: End Poverty

By Tricia Roche, Coordinator

"If this country needs anything to improve health, it's not more intensive care beds— it's not even more vaccine— it's more affordable housing," Dr. Cushman, chief executive of the Champlain Local Health Integration Network, has stated.

Doctors are important to the work of TAPS. They provide vital information that helps people applying for disability status. This is important case by case work. But now, the Canadian Medical Association president-elect Dr. Jeffrey Turnbull is tackling systemic poverty. Here is what he said recently: "If you really want to advocate for health, if you really want to make changes to health, you have to start to make fundamental changes to the way society is structured. You have to deal with issues like poverty." He pointed out that a person in a homeless

shelter has only a 31 per cent chance of living to age 75. In the general population, an individual has an 80 per cent chance of reaching the same age.

Too many studies have shown that health is determined by education, housing, physical environment and, above all, income. One Globe and Mail reporter put it bluntly, "poverty makes people unhealthy and poverty kills."

If we follow measurements by Statistics Canada, we know that a person's income (or lack thereof) has about twice the impact on their health as cancer does. The daily experience of advocates at TAPS, and now data from Statistics Canada, confirms that the most powerful prescription for the health of Canadians is income redistribution.

So, here is the bottom line strategy: Tackling poverty is a health priority. ■

New Staff Members at TAPS

TAPS welcomes Stephen Portman as our new volunteer disability advocacy program coordinator. Stephen came to TAPS a year ago when he volunteered as a disability advocate, and he has been on staff as an income assistance advocate since November. He will now have two "hats" at TAPS, coordinating the disability advocacy program and continuing as an income assistance advocate.

We also welcome Susan Rasmussen in the part-time income assistance advocate position. As well as her degree in Social Work, Susan brings to TAPS her experience in frontline advocacy in Vancouver.

Both Stephen and Susan have "hit the ground running" at TAPS. We are very happy they have joined our staff.

(From Housing Program, page 2)

street. Cost savings can be over \$100,000 per person, even in supportive housing! Yet, governments are strangely reluctant to invest in affordable housing.

In 2000, MP Libby Davies joined other advocates in promoting the One Percent Solution, where all three levels of government would dedicate one percent of total income to affordable housing. Since this measure was never implemented, by now it will cost more to catch up.

In 2009, Libby Davies tried again, introducing Private Members' Bill C-304, An Act to ensure secure, adequate, accessible and affordable housing for Canadians.

Bill C-304, which now seems our best hope for a national housing program, has passed Second Reading and will still be on the table when Parliament resumes. It received widespread support from NDP and Liberal MPs, but only two Conservatives voted for it. Ms. Davies suggests that people wishing to express support for a national housing program contact Conservative MPs at House of Commons, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6. (No postage necessary.)

She has also posted an online petition for people to download and collect signatures in support of Bill C-304:
<http://www.libbydavies.ca/sites/default/files/Davies%20C-304%20Petition.pdf> ■

(From Information, page 1)

person's privacy, or information that may need further explanation.

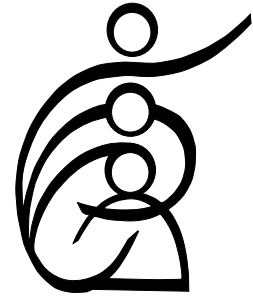
To request access to your records you must complete a "Request for Access to Records" form. You can ask for this form at provincial ministry offices (such as the Ministry of Housing and Social Development office at 908 Pandora) or you can find it on the Province of British Columbia website (link included below). If you request this form but have difficulty getting it, ask a local advocacy centre (TAPS, Cool-Aid, The Law Centre, for example) or outreach worker to print one for you. Complete the form with as much detail as possible, specifying whether you want your entire file or only information from a certain time period or relating to a particular issue. Then submit the form to the government organization you would like your information from.

There is a list online of the privacy/information managers for each government ministry, which you can get from your local advocacy centre (or from the link below).

After you have submitted your form, it can take up to 30 business days for the Ministry of Housing and Social Development to provide your personal information. This information commonly includes telephone logs (where MHSD workers have documented calls to or from you, a summary of what was said, etc.) forms submitted, prior requests, eligibility reviews, and so forth.

If you would like a copy of medical records from such

(See Information, page 7)



Taxes

TAPS is offering tax prep services to people on low incomes on Wednesday mornings, 9:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. No appointments. Drop-in only.

TAPS' Volunteer Advocacy Program

TAPS is looking for volunteers to help clients apply for disability benefits through the Ministry of Housing and Social Development. Volunteer advocates also help clients with appeals. This is an opportunity to develop legal advocacy skills and to provide tangible, sustained support and assistance to people with disabilities. If you are interested in volunteering at TAPS as a volunteer advocate please contact Stephen at 250-361-3521 or at vdap@tapsbc.ca.

(From **Information**, page 6)

assessments as x-rays, CT scans, or blood tests, or records of any hospital visits, you can submit a request (link included below) to the Information and Records Department within the Vancouver Island Health Authority. An advocate can help you with this if need be.

By and large, the MHSD does not inform clients of their right to their personal information. The cycle of poverty is perpetuated when people on low incomes are kept “in the dark” about their rights. Individuals and families

New Practicum Student at TAPS

Hello, my name is Abby Holmstrom and I am a practicum student from the School of Child and Youth Care at UVic. I will be at TAPS until the beginning of April helping to develop the Crisis Supplement Program and working in the Volunteer Disability Advocacy Program. I believe strongly in equality and social justice and have a special interest in the well-being of families in our community. I know TAPS will be a great place for me to apply the knowledge I have gained at university, and to learn more about how poverty affects families and how to advocate on their behalf. I am grateful for the opportunity to work in such a dynamic organization.

across the province are unaware of, or are denied, rights that they are entitled to exercise. This is a form of social silencing and people feel the impact in many ways.

Remember that you are entitled to access your personal information. You do not have to give a reason. You can request this information to help you complete applications or access services, but you can also request this information if you are simply curious and want to exercise your rights. If you come up against obstacles when trying to exercise your right to access your personal information, contact an advocate at TAPS or the Office of the Ombudsperson.

Information request forms can be found online at:

http://www.gov.bc.ca/citz/iao/download/access_request_form_personal_ia00050.pdf

Privacy Departments and contact information can be found at:

www.cio.gov.bc.ca/services/privacy/Public_Sector/contacts/dmip_list.asp

VIHA's Request for Records Form:

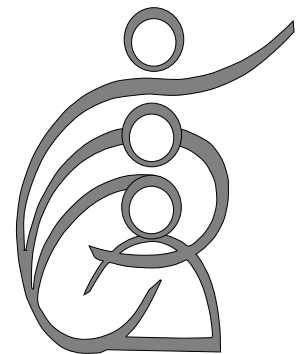
http://www.viha.ca/NR/rdonlyres/18864806-B477-4804-85EB-7B78FCE988C7/0/release_form_patient_records.doc

Where to submit your VIHA Request Form:

http://www.viha.ca/info_privacy/frequently_asked_questions.htm ■

Write for the Taproot

Taproot welcomes articles from readers. Share your ideas, experiences, opinions or outrage with Taproot's vast readership. Articles should be 600 words or less. Please include your name and a way we can reach you (phone, e-mail, or mailing address). The next submission deadline is March 15th, 2010. Send submissions to TAPS (Attn: Heidi) at #302 - 895 Fort Street, Victoria, BC, V8W 1H7, or by e-mail to volunteers@tapsbc.ca.



Together
Against
Poverty
Society

Together Against Poverty Society

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

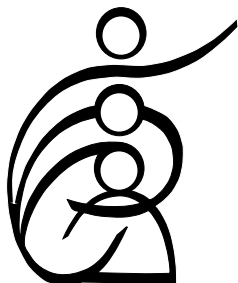
You can reach us between 9:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m, Monday to Friday, by phone at 250-361-3521, or in person at #302 - 895 Fort Street. The office is closed daily for lunch between 12:00 p.m. and 1:00 p.m., and is closed to walk-in clients on Monday and Friday mornings.

Volunteer at TAPS

Front Desk Receptionist

TAPS is looking for a few people to volunteer on our busy front desk. One half-day shift per week. No experience necessary. Training is provided.

Call TAPS at 250-361-3521, contact us by e-mail at volunteers@tapsbc.ca, or drop by the office at #302 - 895 Fort Street.



Together Against Poverty Society

#302 – 895 Fort Street

Victoria, BC

V8W 1H7

Tel: 250-361-3521

Fax: 250-361-3541

www.tapsbc.ca

TAPS is funded by:

The Law Foundation of British Columbia

The Provincial Employees Community Services Fund

Province of British Columbia

and

Other Generous Supporters

We also appreciate the support that our members give.

Become a Member of TAPS!

\$5.00 unwaged (may be waived)

\$20.00 waged

\$80.00 organization

Donations are appreciated.

Charitable tax receipts provided.

Taproot is mailed to members.

TAPS mugs for sale

White coffee mugs with the TAPS crest on one side and a quote from Mary Wollstonecraft on the other: "It is justice, not charity, that is wanting in the world. (1792)" \$9, or two for \$15.