



**TOGETHER AGAINST
POVERTY SOCIETY**

Equity, Justice & Dignity



**20
22**

**ANNUAL
REPORT**

TAPS 2021-22 BOARD OF DIRECTORS

MEMBERS OF THE EXECUTIVE:

Ruth Spooner - President

Intake Coordinator, Island Health

Patricia Cochran – Vice President

Assistant Professor, Faculty of Law – UVIC

Nathan Cartwright – Treasurer

Accountant

Malcolm Sword – Secretary

Inclusion Team Lead

MEMBERS-AT-LARGE:

Felicity Smith

Retired Organizer and Fundraiser

Cathie Boies Parker

Lawyer

Sandra Angus-Vincent

Manager – Daily Dose Society

Caroline Hudson

Medical Administrator

Christine Comrie

CPA Student

ON THE COVER – TAPS STAFF & PRACTICUM STUDENT

(TOP ROW FROM LEFT TO RIGHT):

DOUGLAS KING, CARLEIGH CHEW, HANNAH MANG-WOOLEY,
THAER HARBA, ANTONIA MAH, GILLIAN GAFFNEY

(BOTTOM ROW FROM LEFT TO RIGHT):

CAITLIN WRIGHT, EMILY ROGERS, EMMA WHITE

WHO WE ARE

Together Against Poverty Society (TAPS) is one of the largest anti-poverty organization on Vancouver Island. Established in 1989, TAPS is a recognized leader and resource for citizens, community groups, and social agencies attempting to reduce poverty, serving over 7,000 residents of Greater Victoria, adjacent municipalities, and the Southern Gulf Islands each year... and we still cannot meet the needs of all who approach us.

At TAPS, we believe that the causes of poverty are in the social, economic and political institutions of our society – not the failings of the individual. Through legal advocacy and public education, we have a positive impact on people's lives in ways that honour and promote human rights, justice, and a healthy, sustainable community. TAPS is a non-profit society whose membership is open to individuals or groups concerned with the preservation of civil society, social justice, the eradication of poverty, as well as the continuing moral progress of those ideals.

WHAT WE DO

TAPS provides advocacy services in the areas of income assistance, federal and provincial disability benefits, employment standards, tenancy, and income tax preparation. Our work includes providing information and giving summary advice, negotiation and/or representation to persons of no, low or fixed income.

We also provide public legal education for low income persons and other interested community groups and organizations, which then enables them to advocate for themselves or for their members, and free, year-round tax filing services.

On a larger scale, TAPS engages in systemic advocacy focused on identifying, researching, and addressing issues relating to poverty with particular emphasis on those that affect our local community. TAPS is proud to be one part of a network of community groups and service providers all working in cooperation to advance these issues.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR & DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS' REPORT

DOUGLAS KING, EMILY ROGERS

Thank you for reading the TAPS' 2022 Annual Report! We hope that you enjoy reading about the accomplishments and trends from each portion of our organization and that the dedication and care of our incredible staff shine through in each of the stories contained within.

This year has been marked by significant growth and change, particularly in our work supporting anti-poverty legal advocacy in Nanaimo. In the spring of 2022, the Law Foundation approached us to support two advocates in Nanaimo who were left without a host organization following the collapse of a local non-profit. We welcomed Harriet Manson and Don McConnell to TAPS, both of whom are incredibly skilled legal advocates with over 15 years of experience. Additionally, Kalila Wilkinson joined us as a legal supervisor and expanded her responsibilities to include supervising a number of our Victoria-based advocates. Our Nanaimo advocates have been instrumental in assisting clients with disability applications, appeals, and various income assistance matters. We have loved getting to know Nanaimo and immediately recognized the high demand for anti-poverty advocacy in the Nanaimo community. We are excited to announce that we have been awarded an ongoing grant from the Law Foundation, and we will be opening a permanent TAPS Nanaimo office in 2023. We are proud to be able to offer our legal advocacy services in two communities and recognize the significant expansion this represents for TAPS, which is why at our AGM for 2022 we approved a change to the TAPS constitution to reflect the fact that TAPS is now acting much more regionally than we did when it was founded.

This year, we also experienced significant change with our Board of Directors. Four of our outgoing directors completed their time after serving for six amazing years, the maximum amount of time allowed by our bylaws. We extend our highest gratitude to Nathan Cartwright, Felicity Smith, and Cathie Boise Parker for their dedication, time, and service. We would also like to highlight the departure of our board president, Patricia Cochran, who provided TAPS with excellent leadership during her six-years on the board. We cannot thank her enough for her service. Our new board president, Ruth Spooner, was elected in February and knows TAPS very well as both a past front desk volunteer and board member. We are fortunate to have Ruth's leadership at the helm.



The compassion, grit, and fortitude required by our staff to engage with broken systems and deepening economic injustice is remarkable, and we are incredibly proud of what our team accomplished during 2022. In addition to our individual legal advocacy work, we have been called upon by local, provincial, and national media more than ever to offer our perspective on law reform. We believe that our viewpoint resonates with the media and general public because our perspective is based upon the real-life experiences of the thousands of clients we support every year. We also expanded our presence on social media this year, with our videos about vacancy control garnering over 90,000 views, thousands of "likes," and hundreds of comments. We are excited to build upon this momentum in 2023.

As you read through this report, we want to thank you for your ongoing support of TAPS and hope you feel a part of what we have been able to accomplish. We could not achieve our mission without your support and partnership.

SUPERVISING LAWYER'S REPORT

LEILA GEGGIE HURST



The past year has been one of significant change for the legal supervisor position at TAPS. After over a decade of incredible mentorship and guidance, long-time legal supervisor Lisa Cowan retired early in 2022. She has been, and will continue to be, dearly missed for both her legal experience and expertise, and her incredible warmth, compassion, and humour.

Since Lisa retired, legal supervision work has been shared between Executive Director Douglas King, Nanaimo supervising lawyer Kalila Wilkinson, and staff lawyer Leila Geggie Hurst (yes, it takes 3 of us to fill Lisa's shoes).

Fortunately, TAPS' incredible advocates have taken these changes in stride, as they continue to deal with complex legal issues for clients in increasingly difficult circumstances. The escalating housing crisis, lingering impacts of the pandemic, and skyrocketing costs of living have combined to significantly increase the demand for TAPS' services and the desperation of our clientele.

In this challenging environment, TAPS advocates have continued to respond with compassion, creativity, and commitment. As new supervising lawyers, it has been a pleasure to see the dedication and brilliance of our advocates as they use their keen legal minds and caring hearts to support people through systems in a way that upholds their legal interests and honours their dignity. Advocates have proven to be particularly innovative with efforts made to reach and maintain contact with clients who are without housing and telephone, in order that they receive access to justice despite these communication barriers which could otherwise prejudice their case.

In June 2022, TAPS opened the Nanaimo, with two senior advocates serving clients in the mid-Island community. Nanaimo advocates are assisting with disability applications, appeals, and various income assistance matters. Our Nanaimo advocates have also been active in liaising with community partners to reach clients: TAPS Nanaimo advocates have assisted clients referred by local First Nations bands, Ministry staff, Connective Support Society and the Brain Injury Society.

The advocates' experience continues to put them in a position of being able to provide knowledgeable advice on government policies and proposed legislation and participate on community and provincial committees and consultations based on their sound understanding of the relevant legislation. TAPS continues to serve as an excellent example of the effectiveness of using well trained, specialist legal advocates to address critical issues facing people living in poverty in circumstances where no other legal representation is available.

DOUGLAS KING
Executive Director

EMILY ROGERS
Director of Operations

LEILA GEGGIE HURST
Supervising Lawyer

POVERTY LAW PROJECT

DOUGLAS KING, IRENE MCGEE, LEILA GEGGIE HURST

The purpose of the Poverty Law program is to provide assistance to low-income clients with legal representation on poverty related legal matters, and to support legal advocates at TAPS and across Vancouver Island with legal issues and higher-level cases that arise through the provision of legal advocacy services. The Poverty Law staff lawyer is available to take their own cases, and to handle appeals and judicial reviews from cases started by legal advocates. This is incredibly valuable as it allows TAPS to take on legally complex tribunal hearings or court appearances that advocates would not otherwise be authorized to take.

In February 2022, articulated student Irene McGee and long-time supervising lawyer Lisa Cowan left TAPS. Executive Director Doug King and staff lawyer Leila Geggie Hurst have had to adjust to cover the needs of the litigation project and supervision for TAPS' advocates in other project areas.

CASE TRENDS

2-MONTH EVICTIONS, MONETARY AWARDS, AND LANDLORD-INITIATED JUDICIAL REVIEWS

In the past year TAPS has seen a significant increase in landlords issuing 2-month eviction notices, stating that the landlord or a close family member intends to move into the unit. Since the government increased statutory protections intended to deter 'renovictions', this appears to be the latest strategy landlords are using to evict tenants and increase rents.

If a landlord evicts a tenant stating they intend to move into the unit, and they do not follow through on this stated purpose, the tenant is entitled to a significant monetary award equivalent to 12 months' rent. Unfortunately, over the past year we have seen several hurdles for tenants in this scenario: landlords who evict, then move into the unit for a bare 6 months – the legislative minimum – before moving on again; difficulty obtaining evidence that the landlord has rented to new people; and, even if the tenant is awarded the full monetary award, difficulty enforcing that award and actually receiving the money.

One unanticipated result of this scheme has been an apparent increase in landlord-initiated judicial reviews of significant monetary awards. When a low-income tenant is awarded a major monetary award (12 months' rent is generally tens of thousands of dollars), a well-resourced landlord may apply for judicial review with the intention of intimidating, frustrating, or strategically litigating the tenant out of that money. The BC Supreme Court process is onerous, time-consuming, and extremely difficult to navigate as a self-represented litigant, and there are few pro bono lawyers available to pick up these cases.

These interrelated trends demonstrate the way that landlords' money and power can be used to circumvent even well-intentioned legislation, and also highlight the critical importance of TAPS' litigation project, as some of the few pro bono lawyers available to represent or advise on administrative judicial review files.



IRENE MCGEE AND LEILA GEGGIE HURST

CASE PROFILE **EDDY'S STORY**

One benefit of the staff lawyer sharing the legal supervisor role is that it has allowed for even greater communication and strategic case management between project areas. For one example, as discussed in the Income Assistance project report, in fall 2022 TAPS worked with a client to obtain disability assistance while he was on parole. The IA team did an excellent job preparing persuasive written arguments and gathering documentation for the client's request for reconsideration. While the reconsideration was unfortunately denied, we were strategically very well-positioned for an appeal. Because of the level of legal complexity and arguments based largely on legislative interpretation, the staff lawyer ran the case at the Employment and Assistance Appeal Tribunal, with Eddy offering his own excellent, persuasive and principled testimony.

Eddy's appeal was successful; he was determined to be eligible for PWD assistance despite living in a halfway home, which further opened his eligibility for other supplements. This decision should have reaching consequences for other inmates who are living in halfway houses while on parole. Overall, we see this decision as a big victory that expands Ministry support to some of society's most marginalized and stigmatized people.



121
clients served

TENANT LEGAL ADVOCACY PROJECT

HANNAH MANG-WOOLEY, ANTONIA MAH, ISABELLE DEHLER-HYDE,
THAER HARBA, ANDREA VOGEL

The TAPS Tenant Legal Advocacy Project (TLAP) works to improve access to justice by providing residential tenancy advocacy across Greater Victoria and the surrounding region.

Our team assists tenants with the dispute resolution process of the Residential Tenancy Branch (RTB), and helps mitigate problems that fall under the British Columbia Residential Tenancy Act (RTA) and the Manufactured Home Park Tenancy Act (MHPTA). We also provide public legal education workshops regarding the rights and responsibilities of tenants, and engage in systemic advocacy by participating in policy initiatives, and lobbying government representatives and stakeholders to make residential tenancy legislation and local bylaws more supportive of tenants.



THAER, HANNAH, ANTONIA, AND ANDREA,
TAPS TENANT LEGAL ADVOCATES

CASE TRENDS

EVICCTIONS FOR NON-PAYMENT, EVICCTIONS FOR LANDLORD'S USE OF PROPERTY, AND ILLEGAL LOCKOUTS

A tenant can face extreme measures when their landlord is motivated to re-rent their suite by any means necessary. We worked with a woefully high number of people this year whose landlords were threatening to or physically locking them out of their suites. This is a symptom of the financial incentive that exists for landlords to turnover suites and re-rent them at market value. Fortunately, we were able to help many tenants recoup their losses. While they may not be able to recover their favourite belongings or family photos, we can help them seek monetary compensation at the RTB for what was lost.

CASE PROFILE

JAMES'S STORY

James came to TAPS for help restoring his hydro service, as his landlord had unexpectedly disconnected it. We applied for an expedited hearing for emergency repairs, but due to the backlog of applications at the RTB, it took 2 months for an arbitrator to reach a final decision. During that time James was forced to run an extension cord across his property and rotate use of his electronic appliances (fridge, stove, lighting, etc.). Despite being ordered by the RTB to restore the hydro and provide a generator until repairs were complete, the landlord failed to take any action to resolve the problem. The RTB granted James permission to reduce his rent by nearly half his rent as compensation for the cost of fuel to run a generator until the hydro is restored. James will need to make subsequent RTB claims in order to adequately compensate him for his financial and personal loss during this hydro shut off. However, this case is an example of a good outcome we were able to help a tenant reach by showing the RTB that a landlord was deliberately ignoring their orders and restricting James' access to an essential utility.

753

clients served

VACANCY CONTROL PROJECT

HANNAH MANG-WOOLEY, EMILY ROGERS

The Vacancy Control Project aims to create law reform to implement a system of rent control called “Vacancy Control”. The cornerstone of this policy is that rent is tied to a rental unit and not the tenant who occupies it. This means that a landlord cannot raise the rent for a unit between tenancies. TAPS believes that this policy change would remove the financial incentive for landlords to evict tenants, and would have the overall effect of stabilizing rapidly-inflating rental costs. TAPS has been working on this project since 2019, in collaboration with the Downtown Eastside SRO-Collaborative Society (SRO-C) in Vancouver. Hannah Mang-Wooley has been the lead advocate on this project throughout 2022, with the support of Emily Rogers, who held the role previously.

GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

Over this year, TAPS has worked closely with Victoria city councillors Jeremy Loveday and Sarah Potts to advance support for Vacancy Control at the level of municipal governments. Jeremy and Sarah brought forward motion R16: Explore Vacancy Control at Association of Vancouver Island Coastal Communities (AVICC), held from April 1-3, 2022 in Victoria. TAPS lobbied support for the motion by emailing progressive-leaning delegates in advance of the weekend gathering, urging them to vote for the motion. TAPS attended AVICC and provided lobbying support by leafleting and conversing with AVICC delegates. The motion was successfully passed.

Following AVICC, Jeremy and Sarah brought forward the same motion to the Union of BC Municipalities (UBCM), held Sept 12-16, 2022 in Whistler in the form of resolution NR10: Explore Vacancy Control. TAPS also went to Whistler and engaged in lobbying efforts with the municipal delegates at the conference, and encouraged supporters to contact their city councillors in support of the motion over social media. Unfortunately, the motion did not pass. However, the vote tally was 143-136, which was a loss by only 7 votes. Many delegates indicated that they decided to vote in favour of the motion due to hearing from their constituents in the days before the vote, which we believe was in part due to TAPS’s influence.

EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION

TAPS has had a number of opportunities to promote vacancy control to the public through media interviews. On March 28, Emily Rogers was interviewed by local CHEK news, in a piece about the successful AVICC motion. On May 26, Hannah Mang-Wooley was interviewed for a radio segment on CBC’s “On the Island” about Real Estate Investment Trusts. In this conversation, Hannah advocated for vacancy control as a way to protect renters from the increasing commodification of housing. On June 22, Hannah was invited to be a panelist for an online event sponsored by the Community Social Planning Council. This panel discussed a newly released report from the CSPC on the drivers of homelessness in Greater Victoria. Hannah underscored the necessity for policy changes such as vacancy control to protect people from a landlord’s financial incentive to evict. Emily Rogers published an op-ed in the Times Colonist on September 12 about the need for vacancy control in BC. We believe that these media opportunities help to increase grassroots support for this policy option.

INCOME ASSISTANCE LEGAL ADVOCACY PROJECT

CAITLIN WRIGHT, DAVID EUPEN, GILLIAN GAFFNEY, MADYSON POWELL

The TAPS Income Assistance Legal Advocacy Project works to enhance access to justice by providing reliable legal services to people about their rights and entitlements to income security benefits. We advocate for people by negotiating with government representatives and providing representation at appeals in the areas of Income Assistance (IA) and Persons with Disabilities (PWD) benefits. The project also offers public legal education which aims to expand community knowledge of income supports, barriers to accessing these benefits, and potential remedies.

CASE TRENDS IMPACTS OF HEALTHCARE CRISIS ON ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND RESUMPTION OF STRATEGIC ADVOCACY WORK

Continuing from preceding years, the dual-impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and critical doctor-shortage once again created significant barriers for our clients to access health professionals willing to assist with lengthy PWD application and health supplement forms, and to assist with Ministry denials and Reconsideration applications. Even for those lucky enough to have a primary-care physician, we heard time and time again from clients that their doctors often would not complete all medical sections of the application form, instead referring them elsewhere such as Primary and Urgent Care Clinics, often to work with registered social workers or nurse-practitioners. These impacts were not only felt at the initial level of the PWD application, but also at the level of Reconsideration and even Appeal, before the Employment and Assistance Appeal Tribunal (EAAT). Of concern was the fact that the prescribed 20-day deadline to submit new medical information, and even an extension of an additional 20-business days, could not always guarantee that a client was able to schedule and have an appointment with their doctor to confirm critical medical evidence. Such a situation occurred this year, and forced an ultimately successful escalation to EAAT, because a medical appointment could not be booked in time for the Reconsideration deadline, even with an extension.

Maintaining the balance between service-delivery and one-on-one client work with systemic advocacy initiatives has always required thoughtful and ongoing efforts. This was none more evident during 2022, as the year began at a time when all federal and provincial emergency pandemic income and housing measures had finally stopped, leaving thousands of affected individuals contending with increasing costs for food and housing, while simultaneously seeing their monthly incomes decreased or cut-off entirely. The IA team was pleased to rekindle connections with Ministry executives during the reporting period, including those with the Strategic Policy and Legislation Branch and the Strategic Policy Initiatives Branch; the latter body being responsible for reviewing and updating BC's Poverty Reduction Strategy Act as mandated by the Act. IA advocates at our Director of Operations was also pleased to welcome Minister Nicholas Simmons and his executive team in November for a sit-down meeting at TAPS, to begin engagement on the Act's review and update process, as well as an opportunity to speak directly and candidly to the Minister about what gaps in services have widened and expanded for our clients in now the third year of the pandemic, amongst increasing surges in the cost of living.



CAITLIN AND GILLIAN, TAPS INCOME ASSISTANCE ADVOCATES

CASE PROFILE CHARLIE'S STORY

Charlie came to TAPS for help with a Reconsideration in late summer, after being denied PWD benefits under s. 14 of the Employment and Assistance for Persons with Disabilities Regulation (EAPWD Regs):

- 14** *A person is not eligible for disability assistance or supplements while the person*
- (a) is detained in a lawful place of confinement, such as a federal or provincial correctional institution, jail, lockup, prison or camp, or*
 - (b) is absent from a lawful place of confinement under a temporary absence program and is residing at a halfway house that is funded, sponsored or contracted for by the federal, or a provincial, government.*



478
clients served

Charlie had been given a conditional release from prison earlier in 2022, in the form of day parole, and was then living in a halfway house, funded by Corrections Canada. Under the Corrections and Conditional Release Act, day parole is defined as an authority granted to an offender to help prepare them for full parole, or statutory release, which requires the offender to return to a penitentiary or community-based residential facility each night. A temporary absence program is a time-limited and specific release, escorted or not, for an approved reason (e.g.: health-care educational services, or compassionate grounds (i.e.: attending the funeral of immediate family)). Under legislation, day parole and temporary absence programs are two different types of release, including work programs, voluntary treatment programs, and conditional release. Charlie's IA advocate submitted additional evidence in support of the Reconsideration his client sent in, arguing that while Charlie was living at a halfway house, he was not under a temporary absence program as that is a separate and distinct form of release from day parole, subject to different legislative processes. He further argued that both distinct characteristics laid out in s. 14(b), "being absent from a lawful place of confinement under a temporary absence program" and "residing at a halfway house funded, sponsored, or contracted by the federal or provincial government" must both be present, for this provision to disqualify a person from benefit-conferring legislation like the. With Charlie not under a temporary absence program, TAPS argued that he cannot fulfill the requirements of s.14(b), and cannot be disqualified under this section of the Regs. Unfortunately, the Ministry did not agree with Charlie and TAPS' submission, and the Reconsideration was unsuccessful. As an individual actively engaged in integrating back into the wider community, Charlie was highly motivated to take this denial before The Employment and Assistance Appeal Tribunal ("EAAT") and Appeal the Ministry's Reconsideration decision. With Charlie's IA advocate finishing their work at TAPS at the end of the summer, in September Charlie consulted with another IA advocate and was internally referred to the Litigation project to review the merits of Appeal with our Staff Lawyer. In that project's Case Profile, the conclusion to Charlie's fight to have his PWD designation and disability benefits activated will be presented.

VOLUNTEER DISABILITY ADVOCACY PROJECT

GILLIAN GAFFNEY

The Volunteer Disability Advocacy Project (VDAP) supports individuals living with disabilities to access the medical and financial supports associated with obtaining the provincial Persons With Disabilities (PWD) designation. Trained volunteers provide support and guidance to clients while they navigate the notoriously inaccessible application process for PWD. VDAP's volunteer advocates help by translating client's experiences into language that meets the government's legislative criteria, known as Section 1 of the PWD application. VDAP strives to create a safe environment for clients while providing empathy, respect, and promoting client autonomy. VDAP advocates work with medical professionals to ensure that clients are accurately represented in the medical reporting aspect of the PWD application, with a focus on maintaining positive relationships between clients and their medical providers.

CASE TRENDS

HIGH DEMAND DUE TO INCREASED COST OF LIVING AND CONTINUATION OF OVERWHELMING DOCTOR SHORTAGE

The long waitlist for assistance with PWD applications continued this year, with many clients citing increased cost of living as the reason for their need to apply. We continued to see many clients this year who were applying for disability designation after living on basic Income Assistance for years. Some of these individuals were people who had developed disabilities over the years while living in poverty. Some of the people applying were individuals who had been living with disabilities for years, and whose disabilities had worsened over time. We heard from many clients that while they used to be able to survive off of basic income assistance, the explosion in rent and food costs has left them with no alternative but to seek additional income such as PWD. With no relief in clients served sight for the rental crisis, these numbers are expected to continue to rise.



The critical shortage of doctors in Victoria continued to create serious challenges for clients looking for support with their PWD applications. Clients continued to lose their doctors to retirement, and most walk-in clinics had extremely limited hours and appointments. As a result we added another medical professional to the volunteer roster to help alleviate some of the need in the community.

CASE PROFILE LEE'S STORY

This fall, the Coordinator received a call from Lee, a client on our VDAP waitlist. Lee was a tenant in a subsidized unit, but unfortunately the housing provider had recently given them a notice which stated that they were no longer eligible for the unit they were living in due to a change in family composition. This change in family composition was a direct result of the disabilities that Lee was living with. The property manager had also mentioned that the client would have better standing to maintain their tenancy if they could prove they were a person with disabilities. At Lee's request, the Coordinator was able to liaise with the property manager through the PWD process to keep them apprised of progress, and the volunteer advocate was able to expedite their file to meet the important deadlines set by the housing provider. Lee was ultimately able to maintain their tenancy and was approved for PWD status.

NANAIMO LEGAL ADVOCACY PROJECT

DON MCCONNELL, HARRIET MANSON

The Nanaimo Legal Advocacy Program enhances access to justice by providing reliable legal services to people about their rights and entitlements to disability and income security benefits in the Greater Nanaimo Area. Like in Victoria, we advocate for people by negotiating with government representatives and providing representation at appeals in the areas of Income Assistance (IA) and Persons with Disabilities (PWD) benefits. The project also offers public legal education which aims to expand community knowledge of income supports, barriers to accessing these benefits, and potential remedies.

CASE TRENDS STARTING UP A NEW OFFICE

Before coming over to TAPS in 2022, the Law Foundation's legal advocacy program was housed with the non-profit SEIA (the Society for Equity, Inclusion and Advocacy). Because of its size, SEIA advocates could rely on the administrative staff and reception for the organization to help facilitate client contact. When SEIA closed, the advocates no longer had any support structure in place, and while we were able to step in to provide continuity of employment by hiring the two advocates were previously worked for SEIA, we did not have an office – let alone one staffed with reception – in Nanaimo. This has meant that our advocates have had to work either remotely or from a single office without additional staffing, and our advocates have had very limited ability to meet in person with clients. This has presented a host of difficulties, and forced us to look at creative solutions, like booking out public meeting space at the library. We feel very fortunate to be given the opportunity to expand TAPS outside of Victoria, and as the program moves forward in 2023 our primary goal will be to obtain a fully furnished office that can receive clients, and to start expanding our services to include advocacy on residential tenancy matters, an area which we know remains in high demand. We also expect to be able to hire a manager to run our Nanaimo office, and hope to replicate all of the things that make our work effective and valuable to our clients in Victoria.



DOUGLAS KING MOVING OFFICE SUPPLIES IN NANAIMO OFFICE

CASE PROFILE GRANT'S STORY

Grant connected with our Nanaimo advocates as he was facing a claw-back of his benefits years after he received additional support from the Workers Compensation Board. At that time of receiving WCB benefits in 2016, the client was also receiving support from the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction. The Ministry was supposed to deduct the WCB payments from his disability support but failed to do so for unknown reasons. When our advocate, Harriet, contacted MSDPR for particulars on why they wanted to claw back that money seven years later, they did not have records indicating why no deduction was made, or why they were now pursuing it. Harriet was able to submit a request for reconsideration which raised complex arguments focusing on both procedural fairness as well as the disproportionate impact the claw-back would now have on the client given that his health and financial circumstances had changed significantly over the years.

Our reconsideration was successful, and the Ministry agreed to forgo the overpayment and allow the client his full support amount going forward. While the client provided information on his current medical situation, this was a case that also required more complicated legal arguments, leading to a successful result that the client would have been unlikely to achieve on his own.

VOLUNTEER TAX PROJECT

GILLIAN GAFFNEY, MANDY SCOLLARD

The TAPS Volunteer Tax Project provides free basic income tax preparation services to people with low income. Volunteers prepared up to 10 years of tax returns for clients, allowing clients to access the benefits and returns they are entitled to. Many social programs require clients to have their taxes filed, making TAPS' services imperative to individuals who need to access these income-tested supports. The project was forced to pivot to a drop-off model due to the pandemic and has continued to operate successfully throughout 2021. Thanks to our ongoing partnership with the Disability Alliance of BC Tax Aid program, we were able to continue offering accessible alternative services to clients living with disabilities who may otherwise struggle to access our services.

TAPS' tax program was run by Volunteer Coordinator, Gillian, with support during peak tax season from Tax Administrative Assistant Mandy Scollard. Mandy optimized the digital tax intake tracking system Gillian established in 2021, which further improved the experience of clients while also adding a significant upgrade to our statistic tracking processes. Ongoing relationships between TAPS and other community agencies led to a significantly increased uptake in tax services for 2022, with over 2900 total tax returns successfully filed!



VOLUNTEER TAX PREPARER TONY PULLMAN AND COORDINATOR GILLIAN

CASE TRENDS GIS CUT-OFFS FOR SENIORS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF TIMELY, YEAR-ROUND TAX FILING SERVICES

An unfortunate case trend which continued this year was the high number of seniors who were cut off their Guaranteed Income Supplement (the top up for low income seniors who receive Old Age Security Benefits.) These benefits roll over in July each year, meaning that seniors who have not yet filed their taxes are cut off from their benefit until they file. This comes as a shock to many seniors, who are devastated to see their cheques arrive hundreds of dollars short. We noticed this trend last year and worked to mitigate this in 2022. We created posters advising seniors to file their taxes to avoid interruption to benefits, worked directly with supportive living providers to offer tax services, and ensured that we were prepared for the rush of senior clients we see at the end of July. These approaches helped to catch some of the most vulnerable seniors before their benefits were cut off, and allowed us to better support those who did end up with their benefits cut off by providing expedited service.

The federal and provincial governments both announced temporary benefits to relieve the ballooning cost of living. Most tax clients at TAPS are eligible for the federal GST tax credit and the provincial climate action tax credit. This quarterly benefit requires that the individual have their taxes filed. Temporary increases to both of these benefits were announced this fall, which led to more individuals needing to access tax services once these increases were announced. While most other low-income tax services close for the fall, or the "off-peak" season for income taxes, the TAPS tax project continues to demonstrate the need for ongoing tax supports. Even during our slow season (August through January) and despite a 1-month closure due to staff illness, we processed around 900 tax returns. As one of the only providers available, we were able to help hundreds of clients file their taxes who would have otherwise had to either wait until the new year or go without assistance.

CASE PROFILE **LOREN'S STORY**

The TAPS tax program was contacted by Loren, a senior who had significant barriers to attending the office to have his taxes filed. He had not filed for over 10 years, and therefore had not been receiving any income-tested benefits they may have been eligible for over the years such as the GST credit. Loren lived with challenges which made it impossible for him to come in to access tax services in the typical fashion. He had been working a very physically demanding job for years but was not able to retire as his Old Age Security (OAS) amount would not be enough to live off of, and to be eligible for the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) it was required that his taxes be filed. The Coordinator recognized the significant barriers experienced by the client and worked out a set of private appointments which were more accessible to him. Together they were able to get his taxes caught up, and as a result helped him access over \$10,000 in tax refunds and credits. Loren was then able to continue his application for OAS and GIS, so he could enjoy a well-deserved retirement.



over
\$4.4M
in tax benefits
accessed for our
clients

TAPS VOLUNTEERS

GILLIAN GAFFNEY AND EMMA WHITE, TAPS VOLUNTEER COORDINATORS

TAPS relies on the hard work and dedication of nearly 30 volunteers who come to us for a variety of reasons and from a variety of backgrounds – they are students, retirees, people with disabilities, and people with lived experience of poverty who donate hundreds of hours each year towards supporting our community’s most vulnerable individuals. They bring with them a vast and diverse set of skills, helping with everything from filing tax returns, to answering the phones, illustrating and distributing our newsletter, and helping folks navigate disability applications.

Front Desk Volunteers are often the first connection folks make upon reaching out to TAPS for help. They must have a solid understanding of everything within the scope of TAPS’ work, an extensive knowledge of community resources, and the ability to remain calm and kind while interacting with clients who are often in an understandably great deal of distress. And because clients contact us about such a wide array of issues, our Front Desk Volunteers quickly gain a holistic understanding of where our community is hurting the most.

One of the biggest barriers we saw folks continuing to encounter in 2022 was a lack of capacity amongst local service providers which can make accessing timely and appropriate help feel impossible at times. We felt the effects of this to the nth degree when a particularly brutal cold and flu season rippled through the community in the fall leaving tons of organizations –TAPS included – short on staff and capacity. As inflation rates and the cost of living in BC continues to soar, this means we saw even more folks in even more desperate situations being left with even fewer options for support.

One can imagine that all of this means the role of the Front Desk Volunteer would involve giving and receiving its fair share of bad news, and it does. But it’s also remarkably rewarding to hear how meaningful it is for folks to encounter a kind and compassionate person on the other end of the phone or plexiglass while navigating systems that are so often cold and cruel. Despite the many challenges that come with the role, we managed to maintain a solid team of 8-10 Front Desk Volunteers throughout the year, to whom we owe an immense amount of gratitude for helping keep TAPS up and running when staffing became slim.

2022 was also the year we were able to re-introduce volunteer appreciation events. Our end-of-summer barbeque in September was well attended and highly rated, giving staff and volunteers the long-awaited opportunity to get together in-person. We hope that 2023 will bring even more opportunities for us to all connect and show our thanks for one another.



GILLIAN (TAX & VDAP COORDINATOR) & EMMA (FRONT DESK COORDINATOR)

“To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness.

What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we only see the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places – and there are so many – where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction.”

– HOWARD ZINN

TOGETHER AGAINST POVERTY SOCIETY
GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGES OUR FUNDERS



VICTORIA
FOUNDATION



vancouver
foundation



United Way
Southern
Vancouver Island



...and our many generous individual donors. Thank you!