

## The Notary Foundation: Spotlight on Good Works

Margaret Birrell

# Foundation Grant Assists the Disability Community with Plain Language Income Assistance Information

The Notary Foundation is contributing to a project designed to inform and assist the disability community around recent changes to BC legislation governing income assistance.

The project, managed by BC Coalition of People with Disabilities (BCCPD), was developed in response to the BC government's introduction of the *Employment and Assistance for Persons with Disabilities Act*, and the *Employment and Assistance Act*. The legislative changes are dramatic, including a more limited definition of disability. They effect not only income assistance, but the range of auxiliary services available from the Ministry of Human Resources.

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Because the BCCPD offers a front-line advocacy service, Advocacy Access, the organization quickly recognized that people would need new information and skills to navigate the new system. In fact, the organization feared some people with disabilities might lose their support altogether if they weren't informed of

changes and assisted in responding to the new requirements. For example, between October 2002 and March 2003, 14,000 recipients of Disability Benefits II went through a reassessment to discern their eligibility for the new Persons with Disabilities benefit. These people were one of the first target groups of the project.

With the elimination of some Legal Aid offices and cuts to community service grants, there is an even greater demand for advocacy services for the disability community. The BCCPD particularly wanted to help people living outside the Lower Mainland area, where advocacy services are more scarce.

Seeing this gap, the BCCPD's advocates designed a program to meet the community's needs. The project focuses on plain language materials, explaining everything from the new application process, to changes to auxiliary benefits, to appeals and tribunals.

Materials are targeted to two key groups: people with disabilities and disability advocates. A series of eight "Help Sheets on Disability Benefits" are now complete; some are already in their second printing. They are available on the BCCPD Website. These Help Sheets include "The Persons with Disabilities Application," "Checklist for the Persons with Disabilities Benefit," and "Appealing Denial of the Disability Benefits Reassessment."



*Volunteers, contractors, and staff members of the BC Coalition of People with Disabilities: Back row, left to right: Jane Dyson, Diane Desjardins, Valerie Stapleton, Jim Corbett, and Michael Barnholden. Front row: Mei Ng, Lillian Wong, Hilda Thomas, Florence Corbett, and Margaret Birrell.*

Some of the materials were also used in workshops held by the BCCPD during the reassessment process. The demand for information was too great for the advocates to rely on their usual one-to-one advocacy service. Many well-attended workshops were held to inform advocates and people in the community about the changes, how they affect people with disabilities, and how to comply with them.

The publications completed or in progress include the following.

- A plain language analysis of the new appeal processes
- Guides for the Reconsideration and Tribunal levels of disability benefits appeals
- An Appeal Kit
- An Advocate's Manual
- Help Sheets on disability benefits

All of these materials will be signed off by the BCCPD's supervising lawyer. They will be distributed through the BCCPD's member network of over 1700 organizations across BC. The Help Sheet series has already been distributed to the network.

The BCCPD is a provincial non-profit organization devoted to progress on cross-disability issues, through government advocacy, education, public awareness, and the sharing of self-help skills. ▲

**Margaret Birrell** is the Executive Director of the BC Coalition of People with Disabilities, a province-wide advocacy voice for the cross-disability community. She has held this position for the past 17 years. In her many professional and volunteer commitments, Margaret is a sought-after organizer, strategist, and mentor.

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