

SPOTLIGHT ON GOOD WORKS:

The MS Volunteer Legal Advocacy Program at Work

When I first began working at the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada, BC Division, I had the fortunate opportunity to be introduced to “The Rons.”

These two volunteers, both living with multiple sclerosis (MS), were known for their exceptional skills in helping individuals navigate through the Canadian Pension Plan Disability Benefits forms (CPP).

Not having a background in disability benefits, I didn't know why people with MS would need this assistance.

The Rons quickly educated me. I learned the forms were long, onerous, and emotionally draining. Clients had to look at everything they could no longer do and prove their disability was severe and prolonged.

The Rons also explained that many of our members had been denied their CPP benefits because the members had not provided enough information. Because the bureaucratic systems often had little or no understanding of the symptoms of MS, the forms needed to be completed in a particular way.

After a few conversations, I realized the three of us shared a common belief: There was an urgent call for *pro bono* legal advice, representation, and advocacy

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for people with MS. Front-line staff were receiving a high volume of calls from individuals who had been denied their long-term disability insurance, had been discriminated against, or needed help with benefit forms. With the government cutbacks to legal aid and advocacy programs, front-line staff didn't know where to refer clients and the MS Society did not have the resources to resolve the

legal and advocacy issues. The client need had grown too large for the Society's resources to meet. At that point we decided to develop the Volunteer Legal Advocacy Program (VLAP).

The overall goals of VLAP are to make advocacy available to anyone living with MS in British Columbia and to make legal advice and representation available to people living with MS in the Lower Mainland, Victoria, Nanaimo, Kamloops, Kelowna, and Prince George.

Those areas were chosen because of the high number of people there living with MS and because an MS Society Chapter exists in each of those cities. The program supports persons living with MS



VLAP Coordinators Heather Armstrong (left) and Adrienne Boothroyd with Volunteer Advocate Ron Jones, one of The Rons. The other Ron is Ron Briggs.

who are financially unable to afford legal assistance and are ineligible under any other program or service for advocacy and legal representation.

VLAP was developed with a client-centred approach. We researched and evaluated the calls we had received and divided the program into VLAP Booklets, Advocacy, and Legal Advice and Representation.

We developed five booklets for VLAP. These booklets are intended to help members who are in need of information in the following areas: disability insurance, human rights, Canadian Pension Plan disability benefits, self-advocacy, and knowledge about legal resources in the areas where VLAP exists.

This September we saw that in the past year, our booklets had been downloaded over 25,000 times and that over 1000 booklets were mailed to members living in British Columbia. We were really pleased with these numbers because they validate the fact that the information in our booklets is what clients need. We are successfully filling a niche.

The advocacy portion of VLAP was spearheaded by The Rons. We decided the best use of our resources would be to implement a peer training program. When we recruit new volunteers, we pair them with The Rons. We provide an introductory package and written material on MS/CPP. The new volunteer shadows a core volunteer, then the new volunteer takes the lead in assisting the client and The Rons observe. The advocates focus mainly on CPP. That decision has proven successful.

- Prior to VLAP, 2 out of 3 of our members were denied CPP.
- Since VLAP was developed, they have had a 100 percent success rate.

VLAP has a pool of volunteer lawyers in each VLAP community. These lawyers graciously commit to taking one case per year, from start to finish, for people living with MS. Three years ago, the VLAP began to collaborate with the law firm Davis & Company. This generous

partnership has helped many people living with MS to have access to justice.

Multiple sclerosis is an unpredictable disease that affects each person differently. The symptoms, the level of severity, and the progression of MS vary for each individual. MS can cause loss of balance, impaired speech, extreme fatigue, double vision, and paralysis.

MS is the most common neurological disease affecting young adults in Canada. MS affects twice as many women as men and the age of onset is normally between 15 and 40 years. Canada has one of the highest incidences of MS in the world. As yet, the cause and cure for MS are unknown.

The Volunteer Legal Advocacy Program has been incredibly successful. In the past four years, over 800 people living with MS have been helped with their advocacy and legal issues. The VLAP model was presented in 2005 at the Consortium of Multiple Sclerosis Centers in Orlando and at the National Multiple Sclerosis Conference in Atlanta. The program's success is based on the incredible support it has received from the legal community.

The funding provided by The Society of Notaries Public of British Columbia, through the Notary Foundation, and by the Law Foundation of British Columbia has made a difference; it has provided access to justice for people living with MS. Thank you for taking the MS Society one step closer to fulfilling its mandate:

To be a leader in finding a cure for Multiple Sclerosis and enabling people affected by MS to enhance their quality of life. ▲

Adrienne Boothroyd and Heather Armstrong are the Volunteer Legal Advocacy Program Coordinators of the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada, BC Division.

Voice: 604 689-3144
adrienne.boothroyd@mssociety.ca
www.mssociety.ca