



BC Association
for Community Living

Supporting people with developmental disabilities and their families

**BCACL Public Statement
July 26, 2002**

Woodlands Abuse - Community Advocates Speak Out

Today's release of Dulcie McCallum's report on abuse at Woodlands only confirms what we in the community living movement have known for many years - children and adults who lived in Woodlands, Tranquille, Glendale and other institutions for people with developmental disabilities, were abused.

We know this from incident reports on file, former residents, their family members, former workers and other professionals. We know that abuse at Woodlands was extensive, ongoing and systemic in nature and that it took many forms, including solitary confinement, extensive use of restraints, physical assault, sexual victimization, profound neglect, overmedication and drug experimentation. Although the type of abuse may have varied from person to person, we know that no resident of Woodlands would have escaped the climate of fear, isolation and powerlessness that reduced people to the status of non-citizens within the institution's culture.

We have learned through the experience of other institutions - residential schools, orphanages, schools for the deaf - that the impact of such abuse is profound and long-lasting. For people with developmental disabilities, the impact is no different. We also know that the failure of Woodlands to ensure the safety and nurturing of those in its care represents a profound betrayal of the families who placed their trust in the institution.

From the range of institutional abuse cases that have come to light in recent years, society has learned that all institutions can create fertile ground for mistreatment. When vulnerable people are placed in environments where they are isolated, powerless and seen as "less than" full citizens, then it is easy for those in a caregiving role to abuse their power and tolerate abusive behaviour in others. If, in addition, there is a failure to provide adequate staffing and staff training and there is no external monitoring, the problem is compounded.

We believe that a serious injustice was done to generations of people with disabilities who, through no fault of their own, were denied even the most basic human rights. And an injustice was done to the families who believed that when their children were placed in an institution they would be protected and well cared for.

With the findings of the report now public, BCACL urges this government to acknowledge the facts of institutional abuse, to accept responsibility for restitution, and to work in a spirit of good faith with individuals and families to develop a process to move forward.

We have waited for many years for the recognition of abuse that took place at Woodlands and institutions like it. We have waited many months for the release of this report. Meanwhile, former residents of Woodlands continue to struggle with these issues as they age, and some have died with no recognition of the injuries they experienced. Now that government has completed the initial step of confirming that abuse occurred, it is critical to move forward without further delay.

In designing a process to address institutional abuse, **the most important guiding principle must be to empower former residents and do no further harm**. The needs of those who lived in institutions, and their families, must be paramount. They must determine the most appropriate form of redress for the abuse they suffered. Without that - if others determine the outcome without listening to the people whose lives were directly affected and altered - we will merely create a pattern of control that replicates the experience of abuse.

As a beginning, we call on government to facilitate a process of resolution by

1. providing information to communities across B.C. to notify former residents of Woodlands and other institutions of the willingness to address past abuse
2. facilitating easy access to personal files for former residents or their family members or advocates
3. ensuring that former residents and their families determine the most appropriate form of redress for the abuse they have suffered.

As we address the needs of individuals and their families, it is important to recognize that broader community healing also must take place. Foremost in that process will be helping society move from indifference or denial to a conscious admission of what occurred behind the walls of large institutions, removed from public scrutiny. Through taking that step, we can clearly identify the conditions that give rise to abuse and work to prevent it in all settings where vulnerable children and adults are dependant upon the care and support of others.

What this report offers is an opportunity for all of us to learn important lessons about how to prevent abuse and ensure people with developmental disabilities are supported to live in circumstances that promote dignity, choice, and citizenship. Let's seize that opportunity.

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