THE CAPITAL
AND VANCOUVER ISLAND
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Since 1956, this newspaper has collected money to benefit the less fortunate. Last year, through the Christmas Fund, we raised and distributed about $320,000, and we hope to beat that total this year. We work with the Salvation Army and the Mustard Seed, which handle the disbursement of most of the funds, and also provide financial help to Our Place.

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A grandma's inspiring tale

After years of battling addiction, Shirley Jones seized an opportunity at Our Place and showed the way for others

LINDSAY KINES
Times Colonist

Our Place custodian Shirley Jones sets an example for her two granddaughters. "I keep going forward because I know they're all watching me, that they're going to say, 'Wow, Grandma is really making a difference.' " DARREN STONE, TIMES COLONIST

She still remembers getting the call.

Shirley Jones was fresh out of a recovery centre and looking for work when she applied for a job as a custodian at Our Place Society, figuring it was a long shot at best.

The inner-city community centre, which serves Greater Victoria's most vulnerable people, invited Jones to an interview and then surprised her by calling to ask if she could start work on Monday, Jan. 10, 2011.

"I was amazed that they hired me," she said, "because they know of my alcoholism."

After years of battling addiction, Jones seized the chance to get off the streets and turn her life around.

"This place," she said, "it's a gift to me."

Six years later, Jones is still working at the centre five days a week, raising her two granddaughters and taking classes at Camosun College in the evenings to get her high-school diploma and eventually become a family-support worker.

In what little spare time she has, the 54-year-old member of the Pacheedaht First Nation sometimes gives speeches for Our Place, sharing her experiences of addiction and recovery.

"I love the compassion and support that I get from my co-workers and family members," she said.

"It helps me to move forward and build up my strength and courage and hope and faith for others."

Our Place, in turn, benefits from having Jones around to speak to clients, who are referred to as "family members."

"Shirley's such an inspiration to people, because she's so strong and she talks a lot with the family members and just is an example of what is possible," said Grant McKenzie, director of communications.

"I think that's a big thing about a place like Our Place is that we see everybody as having potential. We really want to bring that potential out, and a lot of times people just need a hand up.

"I think we've seen that with quite a few of our staff members. If you believe in them, it's amazing the good that they can do."

Jones admits the early days at the centre were filled with fear and anxiety. "Many tears fell from my eyes," she said.

She persevered with help from the people and services at Our Place and now provides that same assistance to others, she said.

"I went from being bitter and hard to people to being loving and caring," she said. "So being here has taught me a lot about life."

She counts among her successes the day she noticed a young First Nations girl at the centre, looking lost and confused.

Jones sat and talked with her over a cup of coffee, learning that the girl lived with her grandmother and that the two were going through a rough patch.

At the close of the conversation, the girl got on the telephone to her grandmother and decided to return home, Jones said. "Then, about four months later, she came back to see me and said she was in school and: 'Thanks for the talk,' " Jones recalled.

"I thought: 'Wow, I'm grateful that I recognized her and that I knew she was new and I knew she looked lost.' "

Jones said she hopes to do more work like that in the future, and set an example for her grandchildren in the process.

"I keep going forward because I know they're all watching me, that they're going to say: 'Wow, Grandma is really making a difference.' "

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More home support a must for seniors: report

- Wait times increase for admissions to residential care; average length of stay rises to 17 months
- 85% do not have dementia
- 92% have a regular physician
- CPP payment went up nearly 3%

RICHARD WATTS and CINDY HARNETT
Times Colonist

Home support might be the single most important and overlooked thing when it comes to keeping seniors safe and well, B.C.'s seniors advocate said Tuesday.

"There are a lot of bread crumbs out there, but they all point down the same path — we are not utilizing home support to the extent that we should," said Isobel Mackenzie, speaking to reporters via a telephone conference call.

Mackenzie released her annual 2016 Monitoring Report on Seniors Services Tuesday, revealing the total amount of home support hours delivered to clients decreased by about 0.1 per cent over the year.

Mackenzie noted the drop appears small but over the same year, the provincial population over age 65 grew by 4.3 per cent. Seniors now total 853,388 people, about 18 per cent of the 4.74 million people in B.C.

"Even just to maintain the same level of service you need to be increasing the number of [home support] hours," Mackenzie said.

"It follows a pattern we saw last year," she said. "In both years, this year and last, the number of hours delivered fell well short of the population increase."

Home support is designed to assist a person with daily living, things such as eating, dressing, grooming and toiletries, so they can remain in their own home and delay entry into residential care, once called nursing homes.

This is the second year the B.C. seniors advocate has completed and released the Monitoring Seniors' Services Report. It focuses on five areas: Health care, housing, transportation, personal services and income support.

Mackenzie said the report appears to demonstrate the provincial failure to utilize home support is having an adverse impact on residential care, which is home to four per cent of B.C. seniors.

"We should be seeing a full exploitation of our home support before entering residential care," Mackenzie said.

"We are not seeing that."

Average wait times for people to be admitted to residential care increased in the past year in three of five health regions. Also, the proportion of residents admitted to residential care within the target window of 30 days decreased to 57 per cent from 64 per cent in 2014-15.

Meanwhile, the average length of stay in residential-care facilities, 17 months, is on the increase, up 17 per cent from last year.

Mackenzie told reporters B.C. leads the country in the percentage of people in residential care, who don't, clinically, need to be there. They could be cared for in the community.

She said with the residents staying in residential care longer and, in some cases inappropriately, it becomes more difficult for people to get in.

"The data around residential care was not completely positive," said Mackenzie. "We saw increases in wait times, increases in complaints and less than 100 per cent compliance with licensing inspections."

Despite the need for subsidized housing, the housing stock has remained flat and the Shelter Aid for Elderly Renters subsidy continues to be insufficient, said Mackenzie.

"Housing absolutely needs attention," she said.

If there's good news to be had, it's that the overwhelming number of seniors, 85 per cent, do not have dementia and those who do suffer are making early connections with services that can provide support.

More seniors are making use of the provincial property-tax-deferment program, a key to enable low-income seniors to remain living independently, the report found.

Other highlights from the report include:

- 92 per cent of seniors report having a regular physician (93.8 per cent in Island Health in 2015-2016).
- At the end of 2014-15, approximately 52,000 British Columbians were living with a diagnosis of Alzheimer's or another dementia; four out of five seniors aged 85 and over do not have a diagnosis of dementia.
- The number of residential care beds has increased 3.5 per cent since 2012. But the number of seniors aged 85 and older has increased 21 per cent over the same period.
- The number of seniors' subsidized housing units stayed flat, while the number of people 55 and older waiting for a unit increased by 11 per cent. The median and average wait times decreased slightly, but are still 1.3 years and 2.2 years, respectively.
- HandyDart complaints were down 13 per cent for TransLink on the Lower Mainland but up slightly (three per cent) for B.C. Transit in the rest of the province..
- In 2015, 900 drivers aged 80 and over voluntarily surrendered their licences.
- The maximum payment from the Canadian Pension Plan increased by nearly three per cent over last year.
- The Seniors Supplement, a monthly top-up provided by the provincial government to low-income seniors, remains at $49.30, unchanged since 1987.
- As of Jan. 1, single seniors with an income of up to $45,000 or senior couples with an income of up to $51,000 might be eligible for some level of MSP premium assistance based on allowable deductions. In 2015, 271,242 seniors received some level of premium assistance.
- Referrals to the Public Guardian and Trustee — which responds to allegations and investigates cases of financial abuse, neglect and self-neglect — increased over last year by seven per cent. Its 211 help line received 243 calls, of which 70 per cent pertained to abuse that the caller was experiencing.

The 2016 Monitoring Seniors' Services full report can be viewed at seniorsadvocatebc.ca.

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