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Abuse victims at Woodlands call for compensation

By ERICA BULMAN, 24 HOURS

For 10 years of his childhood, Bill McArthur was regularly beaten by institution staff, had his head held under icy cold water for dangerously long periods, and had every toy his mother bought him ripped from his hands. He was given “medicine” when he wasn’t sick and sexually molested at the age of 14.

But because of a legal technicality, McArthur is excluded from the class action settlement for Woodlands School survivors who were beaten, raped, or used as guinea pigs in medical experiments at the New Westminster facility for developmentally disabled children that operated from 1950 to 1996.

More than a year after a settlement was approved, survivors have yet to see a penny and on Monday, they joined B.C. NDP leader Adrian Dix to call on the Liberal government to compensate all former-residents.

“This government has proven that when they want to get things done, they can,” said the 52-year-old McArthur, who was committed to the institution in 1964 as a hyper-active five-year-old. “They wanted a new roof for B.C. Place for \$550 million; they did it. They wanted a new convention centre for almost a billion dollars; they did it.

“So hiding a legal technicality may be legal but it’s reprehensible. It is morally wrong.”

In July 2010, the Supreme Court approved compensation of \$3,000 to \$150,000 for some 1,000 Woodlands survivors. But more than 300 victims are disqualified because they attended the school before the Crown Proceedings Act took effect in 1974, giving people the right to sue the government for wrongdoing.

McArthur, who left the institution 10 days too early to qualify, said he witnessed unspeakable atrocities during his time there.

“I remember this one staff member would beat this kid with a broom handle and say ‘go to your house’ and point at the table,” McArthur told 24 hours. “And the kid had to crawl underneath the table.”

Many children had all their teeth extracted at once without anesthetic, as punishment. Staff would also take needles, and puncture kids through the abdomen to extract urine samples without anesthetic, McArthur said.

“I have reason to believe I was used in medical drug experiment,” he said, recalling as a little child regularly being put into a straight jacket and force-fed a heavy, sickly sweet liquid.

“They called it medicine but it was something that would make me violently sick,” he said. “Within a minute or two, I’d be upchucking all over the floor.”

Even those eligible for compensation have yet to see a penny because of the bureaucratic red tape.

“No one’s been paid anything yet and at this rate nobody will,” said Gregg Schiller, of We Survived Woodlands Group. “They’ll all be dead by then.”

The deadline to apply for a settlement is September 19.

“If you believe compensation is appropriate then they shouldn’t discriminate against one group of people who suffered the systemic abuse at Woodlands,” said Dix, who vowed to compensate all victims should he be elected premier in a potential snap election this fall.