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AN 'ANGEL' LIFTS HOMELESS MAN



GLENN BAGLO/VANCOUVER SUN

Thomas Willis says Sherrill Mair's generosity helped give him a chance at a life he never knew before he met the Vancouver woman.

Province to pay victims of abuse at Woodlands

Many will get up to \$150,000 each, but about 500 will get nothing

BY ANDREA WOO
VANCOUVER SUN

The provincial government will pay about 1,100 survivors of sexual, verbal and physical abuse at Woodlands School between \$3,000 and \$150,000 each in compensation.

The settlement comes eight years after former B.C. ombudsman Dulcie McCallum completed a review of Woodlands records from between 1950 and 1996 and found "systemic" and horrific abuse at the New Westminster psychiatric institution.

She cited instances of children being hit and kicked, resulting in broken limbs, black eyes and swollen faces.

Internal documents obtained by *The Vancouver Sun* in 2002 also confirmed cases of assault and abuse, including at least four mentally disabled residents who

were sterilized at the institution. "It was a horrifically abusive environment," Bill McArthur, a Woodlands survivor and a co-plaintiff in the lawsuit, said Monday. "It was very cold and impersonal. It was basically a prison for children. Most of the wards were locked."

About 500 victims will receive nothing, however. Citizens are allowed to sue the government for wrongdoing under the Crown Proceedings Act, but only in instances occurring after Aug. 1, 1974 — the day the act came into effect.

McArthur, who boarded at the institution on and off from 1964 to 1967, is one of the victims who will not see any money.

"The government is using this law as an excuse to disenfranchise an entire group of people," he said.

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WARD PERRIN/VANCOUVER SUN

New Westminster's Bill McArthur won't receive government compensation in a settlement with Woodlands School survivors.

Excluded victims need help most, official says

"It's just so callous and disregarding of human dignity and self-respect."

David Klein, lawyer for the Woodlands survivors, said the provincial government has the option of disregarding the act and extending compensation to the whole group.

"The challenge for us is that the negotiations were handled by the ministry of the attorney-general taking a strictly legalistic approach to the case instead of looking at it as a human tragedy," Klein said. "We were never able to bring in non-lawyers who could look at something and say, 'It's true, that's when the statute was passed, but it's wrong. The result is unjust.'"

Gregg Schiller, coordinator of the We Survived Woodlands Group, said the excluded victims are among those who need the money most.

"A lot of them are elderly and none of them are doing very well financially," Schiller said. "None of them want to end up in an institution when they get older because that's their biggest fear. They'd like to know there will be something to keep them in the community for the rest of their lives so they will never have to

return to that environment."

He adds that while no amount of money would ever be adequate compensation, the fact the government is paying is an acknowledgment of wrongdoing.

Klein says compensation for the 1,100 victims at Woodlands after Aug. 1, 1978, will depend on the level of abuse. It is not known how many victims are closer to \$3,000 or to \$150,000, or what the total payout will be.

The settlement awaits approval by the B.C. Supreme Court.

Attorney-General Mike de Jong would not comment, but issued a statement Monday saying he hopes the B.C. Supreme Court will endorse the settlement.

Woodlands opened in 1878 as the Provincial Asylum for the Insane. In 1930, the institute shifted its emphasis to housing people with developmental disabilities, providing them with training and education, and changed its name to Woodlands School in 1950. Woodlands closed permanently in 1996.

awoo@vancouversun.com



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