

Morality question raised over government decision not to compensate all Woodlands abuse survivors

BY SEAN SULLIVAN, THE PROVINCE AUGUST 1, 2011



A group of former Woodlands students gathered at the Woodlands memorial in New Westminster, B.C. on August 1, 2011 to demand they get the same compensation package that other students got. They were there being supported by the NDP and leader Adrian Dix.

Photograph by: Ian Smith, PNG

Bill McArthur still has nightmares about Woodlands School.

The 52-year-old says he continues to relive memories of seeing children beaten and forced into straitjackets, dragged by the hair down staircases and sexually abused by staff members in the late 1960s.

“Even the most hardened criminals in the B.C. penitentiary next door were treated better than we were,” McArthur said Monday.

While hundreds of survivors of the facility that housed mentally challenged and developmentally disabled people will receive settlement payments in the coming months, McArthur will not.

He left Woodlands 10 days too early.

McArthur was one of a dozen or so former patients who gathered in New Westminster Monday to hear NDP Leader Adrian Dix issue a renewed call for compensation for all victims of the infamous school.

“The government is using a legal technicality to divide Woodlands survivors into two groups: One that

gets compensation, and one that doesn't," Dix said at a memorial for those who died at the school.

The Supreme Court has ruled that it is not possible to sue the B.C. government for acts committed before the Crown Proceedings Act was introduced on Aug. 1, 1974, leaving dozens of survivors like McArthur without access to compensation.

Dix said the cut-off was legally correct but morally wrong.

"It is likely the most serious abuse at Woodlands took place before 1974, and practices were worse before 1974," he said.

The class action lawsuit approved by the B.C. Supreme Court will grant between \$3,000 and \$150,000 to each former resident who can establish harm while living at Woodlands on or after Aug. 1, 1974.

Hundreds of children were sexually, physically and emotionally abused at the school, which opened in 1878 as the Public Hospital for the Insane.

Former residents tell of having teeth forcibly pulled without anesthetic, beatings, broken limbs and unbearably hot or cold showers.

"This is the cruellest thing I've ever seen our government do to people," said Gregg Schiller, a spokesman for the We Survived Woodlands group.

Schiller said many of the roughly 300 survivors are especially disappointed as they were the first to fight for a settlement — but will receive nothing.

"I've seen a lot of abuse in my time," said Richard McDonald, 69, who spent 10 years at Woodlands from the age of nine.

"We were the ones that were doing all the fighting to get the compensation," he added. "We just want to forget we were in here."

Dix pledged to introduce a motion to extend compensation to all victims when the legislature resumes. If there is an election that sees the NDP take power, he promised to make the change "on day one."

The present applications for compensation must be made by Sept. 19 to B.C.'s Public Guardian and Trustee or through the Klein Lyons law group.

According to a memorial plaque near the former grounds of the school, in 1958 more than 1,250 people were housed in the 10-hectare site.

ssullivan@theprovince.com

twitter.com/seanpatricks

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