

February 2012

825 West 23rd Avenue,
Vancouver, BC
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Re: Michener Awards, Victoria Times Colonist submission

To: The Judging Panel

I am the parent of a youth with special needs and co-lead [Moms on the Move](#), British Columbia's largest volunteer network providing advocacy, information and support for families of adults with developmental disabilities and children and youth with special needs. I'm also a former journalist (and part of the [Globe and Mail team awarded the 1988 Michener](#)), so I appreciate the determination and effort that underlies such journalistic endeavours.

In June 2010, Victoria Times Colonist reporter Lindsay Kines first exposed how an unannounced "service redesign" was forcing adults with developmental disabilities and their families into crisis. Family support was being drastically cut and adults forcibly moved from group homes into cheaper care settings to alleviate provincial budget pressures. The moves violated human rights and Provincial policy honouring individual choice and the right of families to help shape individual community living/support plans.

Feedback from our networks showed the issues were serious and systemic. Especially disturbing was the pervasive fear preventing many families and care providers from speaking out. With growing waitlists, they feared losing all supports if they complained. Families provide more than 80% of lifelong supports for adults with developmental disabilities in Canada. Without community living supports, they face a crushing burden, and it was clear to us that government cuts were creating severe stresses on families and placing many individuals at risk.

Mr. Kines' reports galvanized family advocacy groups. We joined other provincial stakeholders to create an unprecedented collaboration, the BC Community Living Action Group, and began pressing the provincial agency, Community Living BC, and government, for answers. For almost a year, authorities denied or downplayed reports of service cuts, group home closures and forced moves, refusing to even meet with community stakeholders. Few other reporters challenged the denials, and the story would have ended there, as far as the public was concerned. But Mr. Kines and colleagues at the Times Colonist persisted, with fresh reports, opinion columns and editorials revealing more details challenging government's insistence that all was well.

By summer 2011, as evidence of the systemic crisis mounted, the broader media joined in, generating a public outcry that finally forced government to act. A new minister was appointed and a series of reviews were ordered. The Premier acknowledged that cost-cutting had gone too far and that CLBC had lost sight of its core values. Our Province, which once led efforts to close institutions and develop inclusive, community-based models to support adults with developmental disabilities, had lost its way.

Adults with developmental disabilities represent about one percent of the Canadian population. Most don't vote. They are among the most vulnerable citizens in our society, their voices easily drowned out by larger, well-organized and well-funded political constituencies. Nonetheless, Canadians have consistently supported a publicly-funded infrastructure that helps them live safe, inclusive lives, with opportunities to realize their considerable abilities and contributions to communities. Independent oversight and reporting is essential to alerting Canadians when governments are distracted by competing demands and fail to meet expectations. In BC, serious oversight gaps in the provincial community living system meant the news media, and in particular the Victoria Times Colonist, played an especially critical role in stepping up to fill the shoes of public watchdog.

In a world of ever-tighter bottom lines, news organizations struggle to provide the in-depth investigative reporting that I and my colleagues undertook two decades ago. It requires extraordinary effort and commitment, as exemplified by the Victoria Times Colonist's leadership in exposing BC's community living crisis. Mr. Kines and his colleagues stepped up to fill a void and performed an invaluable public service, for which they deserve the thanks and recognition of all Canadians. I strongly urge you to consider them for the 2011 Michener Award for community service journalism.

Sincerely

Dawn Steele, MOMS on the Move