



## BC Schizophrenia Society – Rights Notification Stance February 10, 2021

The British Columbia Schizophrenia Society (BCSS) is dedicated to upholding the right to health and the legal rights of persons suffering from schizophrenia and other serious mental illnesses. BCSS is a provincial non-profit organization focused on providing programs and support for families impacted by schizophrenia for nearly forty years. BCSS' mission is to support families affected by schizophrenia and other serious mental illnesses in British Columbia through education, advocacy, and research.

In 2019, BCSS commended the Ministries and Health Authorities for quickly acting on the majority of the 24 recommendations outlined in the Ombudsperson's Report. The 24 recommendations (now accepted in principle by government and Health Authorities) focus on three key areas:

- Increasing oversight and accountability by conducting regular compliance audits, setting 100 percent compliance targets and increasing public reporting about involuntary admissions.
- Training staff and physicians regarding the necessity of form completion and the codification of standards for compliance with the *Mental Health Act*.
- The Ministry of Attorney General has committed in principle to develop an independent rights advisor service that would work in designated facilities in the province and provide advice to patients about the circumstances of their detention and their options if they disagree with the detention or a related decision.

The first two points improve adherence to existing regulations, which BCSS strongly supports. In terms of the third point, BCSS has stressed that if the proposed rights advisor service is funded "...given the importance of understanding psychiatric patients' need for treatment and support systems in providing advice, it is imperative that any outside agency staff be trained to address these needs, including communication issues." BCSS supports an independent rights advisor service that is able to connect with the individual and their family in order to further explain the circumstances of a patient's detention and their rights, as well as all of the options available to them.

BCSS has always strongly supported the BC Mental Health Act and the need to have involuntary treatment. Schizophrenia - a brain illness with the highest rate of involuntary admission and treatment due to its symptoms - often preclude the person from accepting treatment voluntarily. Without involuntary treatment under the Mental Health Act, desperately ill people can experience unnecessary ongoing suffering, criminalization, homelessness, violence, and family disruption. As a family organization, BCSS members know first-hand the importance of correctly interpreting the intention, meaning, and procedures of the Mental Health Act. BCSS has long advocated for family involvement because families must often help their ill relatives access proper medical treatment.

BCSS also believes that the creation of a clearly formulated and formalized service focused on the patient and their family when an individual is involuntarily detained in one of BC's designated psychiatric facilities is essential. BCSS shares the Ombudsperson's perspective: "These two priorities - treatment and rights - need not be mutually exclusive. One need not come at the expense of the other. They must work hand in hand."

To summarize, BCSS understands that providing accurate and empathetic rights advice to involuntary patients is imperative. BCSS also believes it is critical for BC families to be given the opportunity to have guidance and support when their loved one is involuntarily detained in a designated mental health facility. The rights advisor needs to have a solid understanding of their situation, provide emotional support to the patient and family, and be able to discuss all of the options available to them. This, in turn, will alleviate some of the pressures felt by the clinical team and provide knowledgeable support for patients and families throughout their journey within our provincial mental health system.