

The Vancouver Province

Disabled ready for workforce; opportunities: Victoria invests in 300,000-strong talent pool

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Page: A29 / FRONT
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Illustrations: Colour Photo: Sam Leung, The Province / Hiring Phyllis Knudsen was 'best decision I ever made,' Dale Buote said yesterday. ;

When chef Phyllis Knudsen was told nearly a year ago that she had osteoarthritis in her legs, she knew her days of preparing food were over.

But the feisty 58-year-old refused to be brought to her knees by the disease and started looking for a new life and job. "I didn't know where to turn, at first, and felt that being a disabled woman in her 50s, everything was stacked against me," she said yesterday.

She started some interior-design courses and undertook some job-search help and eventually landed at the door of Dale Buote, managing associate at False Creek Design Ltd. He admitted he didn't have a job for her, but was taken with her demeanor, life experience and took her on 10 months ago.

"It was the best decision I have ever made," Buote said.

Knudsen is now the bright, public and industrious face of thousands of disabled community workers who want to take their rightful place in the working world.

The provincial government -- facing a skills shortage and knowing that disabled workers must be brought into the mainstream -- yesterday awarded \$18 million in contracts to three community-based service providers to deliver the new Employment Program for Persons with Disabilities.

The three agencies are Neil Squire Society, B.C. Society of Training for Health and Employment Opportunities, and WCG International HR Solutions.

Claude Richmond, Minister of Employment and Income Assistance, said "individuals with disabilities currently provide a talent pool of 300,000 working-age persons -- people who are ready, willing and able to fill many of the jobs available today if given the chance."

"Businesses in B.C. will need to fill one million new job openings by the year 2015," he said.

"Since 2002, when the employment program for persons with disabilities began, B.C. has invested \$95 million and helped 17,000 people."

Vancouver Mayor Sam Sullivan applauded the new program and recalled the dark days after he was disabled and left on welfare in social housing. With help from changes in welfare regulations, Sullivan

said he was able to go on and succeed, and every disabled person in B.C. should have the same opportunity.

The new program, which will begin offering services next month, is expected to help 6,000 people a year with pre- and post-employment services, including career planning, skills training, employment placement and job-retention support.

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