

The Vancouver Sun

\$18 million to help disabled; B.C. finances services to help 300,000 'ready, willing and able,' to find work

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Illustrations: Photo: Ward Perrin, Vancouver Sun / Employment Minister Claude Richmond (rear) and Vancouver Mayor Sam Sullivan listen to Phyllis Knudsen talk about going from chef to interior designer after osteoarthritis struck. ;

A total of \$18 million in contracts has been awarded to three organizations to help disabled workers find jobs through the new Employment Program for Persons with Disabilities, provincial Employment Minister Claude Richmond announced Monday.

"B.C. will need to find one million new jobs by 2015," Richmond said in announcing the contracts. "I know where there are 300,000. I really do. These people are ready, willing and able to work, given the chance. There are many jobs that could be filled by persons with disabilities."

The new program, which will start offering services in July, is expected to see 6,000 people participate each year.

The ministry selected the Neil Squire Society, BC Training for Health and Employment Opportunities and WCG International HR Solutions (the parent organization of Triumph Vocational Services) as the main service providers for the program.

The three organizations, which will work closely with local community agencies, will help clients by offering career planning, employment skills training, employment placement, and job-retention support.

They were chosen after a year-long process that included what the ministry called extensive consultations with service providers, clients, community agencies, and ministry staff.

Neil Squire Society operations manager Gregory Pyc said Monday that he is pleased with the announcement. He called the Employment Program for Persons with Disabilities one of the most "comprehensive pre-employment programs and employment programs in North America. There's no equal. None. It's that simple."

WCG president Ian Ferguson also hailed the announcement, saying B.C. is moving ahead in providing opportunities for disabled people.

"We have a lady in our call centre who's blind. And she's one of our greatest assets," he noted.

Phyllis Knudsen, who was on hand for Monday's announcement, worked as a chef for 25 years but had to quit when she developed osteoarthritis.

Through the help of Triumph, Knudsen applied for work at False Creek Design Group, where she now works as an interior designer.

"I thought I was done," said Knudsen in an interview. "I was 56 and I was [cooking] since I was 30. But my arthritis precluded me from doing that anymore. Triumph gave me unwavering support. Even a disabled, middle-aged woman can start over."

Knudsen's boss, Dale Buote, said he's very glad that he hired Knudsen.

"It's worked out terrifically. Phyllis has been a great addition to the staff. I wouldn't hesitate to recommend [hiring a person with a disability]. You'll be amazed at what you'll find."

Vancouver Mayor Sam Sullivan, who became quadriplegic after breaking his neck in a skiing accident, said at Monday's announcement that he too experienced tremendous difficulties finding work after he became disabled.

"If it hadn't been for the changes [in opportunities for disabled people], I would still be on welfare and living in social housing."

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