

Disabled stage rolling protest for rights

BY ANNE SUTHERLAND, THE GAZETTE SEPTEMBER 1, 2013



A protest march was held in Montreal on Sunday afternoon by disabled activists protesting against Quebec's social aid policies.

Photograph by: Marie-France Coallier, The Gazette

MONTREAL — A peaceful and slow-moving protest wound through the downtown core Sunday to demand equal rights.

Slow because the majority of the participants were in wheelchairs, motorized or otherwise.

The protesters were severely disabled, sight impaired and otherwise unable to work in traditional jobs. They don't want to be placed in long-term homes and they don't want to be lumped in with all others in terms of social aid.

They want more caregiving allocated so they can stay at home and not get hidden away in CHSLD with the elderly and infirm, a strategy that they say costs the government much more in the end.

The Movement Citoyen Handicap-Québec (MCHQ) staged what they claimed was the first-ever demonstration of its kind to bring attention to their plight and to shame the provincial government into making changes to the social aid program that they say singles out the disabled.

They staged their rolling protest to travel from Lafontaine Park to the office of Premier Pauline Marois, just east of McGill College Ave.

As it was a holiday weekend, there was no one there to greet the protesters when they got to 770 Sherbrooke St. West.

The assembled protesters had pickets that said: 'Not Dead Yet' and 'Suffocating in Poverty, Let us Breathe!'.

The group has been agitating for changes to the social aid program that they say unfairly targets the disabled and forces many disabled people into a state of poverty.

Take Richard Guilmette, founder of MCHQ and someone who was diagnosed with Muscular Dystrophy as a child, a neuromuscular disease where the muscles waste away. Those with MD often lose the ability to walk, talk or even breathe.

Guilmette's disease has progressed to the point where he cannot do anything by himself and is confined to a wheelchair. He cannot answer the phone, dress himself or go to the washroom without help. Working is out of the question.

Six years ago, he married his wife, Karin Savard-Arsenault. She works. According to welfare rules, if the gross income of a couple is over \$1,200 a month, social assistance is cut off. His monthly cheques of \$900 stopped coming.

"He is penalized, he's not getting a cent," Savard-Arsenault said. "Right now it's the same rules for everyone, for people who aren't handicapped and can work and the disabled who can't work."

"The person who handled his case at the social aid offices actually said: 'Why are you getting married?', and told us what would happen," Savard-Arsenault said. "It's not like he can change his situation. We didn't want to lie about being together, we wanted to get married."

Guilmette and his group delivered a petition to the National Assembly in February asking that the government establish a special program of social aid for the severely handicapped outside of the rules and regulations of "regular" welfare.

"They turned it down, they said they won't change the rules, it wouldn't be fair," Savard-Arsenault said.

Under the current social assistance plan, those with a handicap are entitled to a maximum 44 hours of homecare a week. At \$12 an hour, Guilmette figures that works out to \$28,000 a year. Placing the handicapped in long-term-care housing costs the government \$90,000 a year and, therefore, expanding home care would save the government in the end, he said.

Lawrence Parent, a vocal advocate for handicapped access to buildings and public transit, gets home care as part of the program, but says she's at the maximum limit and were it not for extra help from friends and family, she would not be able to stay at home.

"If my situation changed, I might have to go to a long-term-home," Parent said.

asutherland@montrealgazette.com

© Copyright (c) The Montreal Gazette