

# Prying out dollars for disabled

**Legal worker spearheads claims, has inspired many to join her fight to reform Ontario benefits system**

March 15, 2007

**SANDRO CONTENTA**

FEATURE WRITER

Two decades of defending the dignity of the poor have taught Nancy Vander Plaats to savour small victories.

"We have to do the right thing," says Vander Plaats, 56, a legal worker at Scarborough Community Legal Services.

For Vander Plaats, that has meant leading the fight to reform Ontario's program of disability benefits, a system whose treatment of applicants was denounced as "morally repugnant" last year by provincial ombudsman André Marin.

It's hard enough being poor in Ontario. Add a severe disability – physical or mental – to the mix and the odds can seem insurmountable.

Yet for many, accessing benefits only compounds the misery. Ontario's Disability Support Program, with its frustrating labyrinth of rules and requirements, rejects thousands of qualified applicants by design, activists insist.

A soft-spoken, self-proclaimed optimist, Vander Plaats has dedicated herself to setting things right.

As a community legal worker, she defends and guides people through the benefits maze. As founder of Ontario Disability Support Program Action Coalition, she pushes for reforms to make the system more humane.

Along the way, she's helped to spawn a number of advocacy groups, from the single mothers in Regent Park to a city-wide support network run by recipients of disability benefits.

As far as Vander Plaats is concerned, the poor and disabled have no better advocates than themselves.

"Poverty is on the political agenda now because people have been relentless. And few have been as relentless for so long as Nancy," says **Sarah Blackstock, policy analyst with the Income Security Advocacy Centre.**

The efforts of Vander Plaats and others have pushed the Liberal government to implement minor reforms in the disability benefits program, including a 5 per cent increase in payments, paid transportation to medically supervised programs, and a reduction in the payment cuts that occur when recipients get a job.

Every little bit helps when more than 215,000 recipients struggle to survive on a maximum, for a single person, of \$979 a month.

But the plight of disabled people in financial need continues to dominate the work of Vander Plaats' legal aid office, and 78 others across the province.

Nancy Halford was denied benefits three times despite severe diabetes, arthritis, asthma, deep depression and post-traumatic disorder brought on by years in a homeless shelter and violence from an abusive relationship.

Her suffering was extensively documented in medical and psychological reports, yet it took an appeal by Scarborough Community Legal Services – based on the same evidence – to finally get Halford \$726 in disability benefits last month.

"Nobody knows how hard I tried to make ends meet. And if I was turned down again, I would have said, `Why live? I just can't do this any more,'" says Halford, 59, sitting in Vander Plaats' office.

"The system is in really bad shape and it just needs to be overhauled," she adds.

"Politicians need to spend a day living the life of someone like me. Then maybe they'll understand."

Says Vander Plaats: "It's still very much a system based on policing and suspicion of fraud."

Vander Plaats came to the battle as a single mother of two children in 1984, the year she joined a fledging legal aid office in Scarborough. It proclaimed its mission on a large banner – "Law for the people" – that still hangs in the reception area.

She had already founded a single mothers' group in Regent Park to help access welfare benefits. She later formed the Ontario Social Safety Network and took her anti-poverty campaign province-wide before the NDP government of the time seconded her to work on welfare reform.

After the Conservatives came to power, slashing welfare rates by 22 per cent and implementing the Ontario Disability Support Program, the number of disabled people turning to legal aid offices for help skyrocketed.

The complex application process – with tight deadlines for a 14-page application form, a detailed medical assessment and proof of inability to work – all but guaranteed rejection for those not using a lawyer.

A 40-minute phone interview to assess eligibility also proved an intimidating screening device for those with limited language skills or mental health problems.

In January 2002, Vander Plaats founded the ODSP Action Coalition, bringing together medical associations, legal clinics and people on disability benefits. The coalition held 16 highly attended meetings across the province, collecting stories of denial and despair.

A year later, when the social services minister agreed to meet with three coalition members, Vander Plaats made sure that Margaret Copeland, who suffered from depression and drug addiction, was among the delegation.

"Nancy isn't the kind of person who says, 'Talk to me and I'll talk to the politicians.' She wants us to speak for ourselves," says Copeland, 60, who has moved from disability benefits to a job.

Vander Plaats helped Copeland set up Toronto's first support group run by people on disability benefits, lobbying for change and helping claimants through the application process. It has grown into a network of five groups across the city.

"We couldn't have done any of this without Nancy's support," Copeland says. "Whenever we had a problem, whenever we got confused, we always had someone to go to."

Copeland says there's no mistaking the impact of her network on people with disabilities.

"When they arrive for their first meeting, they're usually a mess. Some of them can hardly talk," she says. "After they get their benefits, you can't tell it's the same person. Suddenly they can get their teeth fixed and ride the TTC."

Cheryl Duggan set up one of the self-help groups after Vander Plaats appealed the rejection of her initial claim for benefits and won. Duggan, who suffers from a degenerative muscle disorder that makes walking

difficult, receives \$906 a month and is poised to finish a university degree in art history.

Her Scarborough-based group focuses on getting recipients out into the community, including a recent trip to a comedy club.

"A lot of us are socially isolated," says Duggan, 40. "Nancy urges us to do what we feel needs to be done, and that helps a lot."

Duggan's group is working on ways to make disability benefits an issue in the provincial election campaign, a project backed by Vander Plaats' ODSP Action Coalition.

Vander Plaats harbours no illusions of bringing about radical change in a system that struggles to implement even the simplest reform.

In 2004, for instance, the government agreed to change its computer-generated form letters: Recipients whose benefits are cut would be given an explanation and a phone number to call for inquiries.

The new letters have yet to go out.

Still, Vander Plaats sees hopeful signs, with Ontario Finance Minister Greg Sorbara musing about a spring provincial budget that tackles poverty, a growing campaign for a \$10 an hour minimum wage, and the *Toronto Star's* increased focus on poverty issues.

"At least now we're being heard," she says.