

## **Citizen Advocacy eyes Renfrew County**

Agency supports people with disabilities

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Citizen Advocacy of Ottawa is exploring the possibility of branching into Renfrew County.

Citizen Advocacy, a United Way agency, is conducting a feasibility study in order to find ways to link people with disabilities to volunteers who offer support and friendship when they need it the most.

Since 1974, Citizen Advocacy has been matching people with disabilities with volunteer advocates.

The Ontario Trillium Foundation is funding the feasibility study. The study is interviewing families and agencies from Prescott-Russell, Stormont Dundas and Glengarry, and Renfrew County. The results of the study will be available in November.

Regionalization project coordinator Kathleen Stephenson said that each year the need is growing.

"We are currently helping 210 people in Ottawa, but we have more than 180 men and women on our waiting list. We are also getting calls from people from Renfrew County asking for help.

"Unfortunately our resources are limited to the Ottawa region, but we do see that there is a need for Citizen Advocacy outside of our region and we hope to expand," Ms. Stephenson said.

She explained that the program helps clients feel wanted and appreciated.

"We don't want to be alone in life, and our clients feel the same way. Most of our clients live alone and they just want companionship, having someone there who is willing to listen to them, or offer encouragement and friendship is important. They just want the normal things we take for granted," she said.

According to Ms. Stephenson, the organization sets up a one-to-one match between volunteer advocates and its clientele.

"We try to match the protegee, the person with a disability, with one of our volunteer advocates. The program matches them according to their same interests, so they would have something in common and form a stronger relationship," she

said. "We want the experience to have a profound effect on both the volunteer and the client."

Madawaska Valley Association for Community Living executive director Marion Peck said that places such as Renfrew County would benefit from this important program.

"In Barry's Bay the area is quite isolated geographically, and our biggest barrier is transportation. A majority of our clients are paying for transportation.

"If we had a program like Citizen Advocacy it would enhance the services currently offered in Renfrew County," Ms. Peck said.

"It's so much easier to go out with a friend than paying someone to be with you. Knowing that someone is by your side because they care is important to all of us, and it's no different for our clients."

Ms. Peck said that she is looking forward to reading the results of the study.

"We are very excited about this study because Citizen Advocacy program has been very successful all across Ontario.

"Ottawa is just one example how the program helps people in need. Citizen Advocacy would be a welcomed resource to Barry's Bay and Renfrew County," she said.

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