

Leisure Access Work:

Perspectives of Municipal Recreation Staff in Vancouver

A Summary Report Based on a Master's Thesis Project

By: Kathryn M. Cureton, M.A.

The University of British Columbia

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1. Background to the Study

The mandates of most municipal recreation departments emphasize the importance of including ‘everyone’ in recreation, regardless of one’s socioeconomic status (Scott, 2008). Continual budget cuts and the rise of market-focused, “neoliberal” politics have influenced a growing number of municipal recreation departments in local government to adopt market-driven principles focusing on cost reduction and revenue generation (Thibault, Kikulis, & Frisby, 2004). Consequently, staff who do leisure access work to include citizens living on low incomes are in compromised positions to continue carrying out their work among pressures to meet the bottom line. The nature of leisure access work and the complexities it entails had not been thoroughly explored in the academic literature. Furthermore, frontline staff who do this work were rarely consulted about the work that they do. **The purpose of this study was to develop a deeper understanding of leisure access work from the perspectives of those who do it in order to determine how municipal recreation staff are able to go about this important work among today’s economic pressures.**

The research was informed by social liberal and neoliberal theories. Social liberalism refers to citizen equality, fair distribution of resources, and a collective responsibility for society (Brodie, 2007; Karlis, 2004). Neoliberalism refers to market-driven politics that prioritize efficiency, accountability, and competition (Lazzarato, 2009). I also used Rao, Stuart and Kelleher’s (1999) exclusionary power framework that considers how power in an organization affects people’s experiences.

2. Study Details

Agency approval was gained from the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation to carry out this study with community center staff in Vancouver. One of my goals was to hear various perspectives on leisure access work so staff were recruited from a variety of different positions from different neighbourhoods across the city. There were two phases in this study: interviews (phase 1) and follow-up focus groups (phase 2).

Phase 1 - Interviews

I had aimed to conduct 12-15 interviews but interest in the study was high so I ended up doing 20 interviews between June and September 2009. I used a list of questions as a guide, but allowed the interviews to flow more like conversations, covering what each staff person felt was most important regarding leisure access work. The following are examples of some questions that were asked:

- How have you come to work in municipal recreation?

- Tell me about the job you are doing now and your role with leisure access.
- What makes leisure access work tough?
- What changes to leisure access, if any, do you think are necessary to improve access to recreation for citizens living on low incomes?
- Are you in a position to provoke these changes? What would it take for these changes to occur?

I found that most staff brought up the challenges in their work early in the interviews before I got the chance to ask. Although I did not intend to analyze policy in this study, most conversations centered on challenges working with the current Leisure Access Card (LAC) policy; therefore, the LAC policy is a common topic in this report.

Phase 2 - Focus Groups

All but one staff person showed interest in attending follow-up focus groups. Sixteen people were scheduled to attend one of two focus groups on Monday September 29th and Thursday October 1st, 2009. Twelve people participated, as on each day a few staff could not make it due to illness, family or work priorities. The purpose of focus groups was to continue the conversation on leisure access work in a small group setting and was an opportunity for me to present my findings from the interviews and make sure I was accurately describing staff's experiences. The focus groups also served as a unique experience for staff as they rarely meet with colleagues in different positions from different community centers to discuss leisure access work and this experience seemed to be appreciated, as one person said:

"[It is] sort of like you're coming in from a perspective that, you're coming in to help us bring it up as a discussion piece. Just bringing this group together to me is amazing because I don't know if I've ever been in a group to even talk about anything! As in policy-wise, you know, to be given the opportunity to talk about it and be taken seriously about it. So it's appreciated."

The high interest in continuing the conversation about leisure access work signaled to me that staff were passionate about their work and wanted to talk about it.

3. Findings

In this section, I highlight the key findings in this study, starting with two underlying themes, and then describe the major challenges identified by staff (in no particular order) and some ways that staff dealt with those challenges. It is important to acknowledge that while these challenges were discussed by many of the 20 participants, not all perceived these challenges in the same ways and some discussed unique challenges that were not included in this report. I have included some quotes from staff to give more context to the important work that they do.

Leisure access work is important

There was a shared feeling among the twenty staff that participated in this study that leisure access work is very important and that their municipal recreation department should be making efforts to include citizens who live on low incomes.

Leisure access work varies

Municipal recreation staff are involved in leisure access work for a number of different reasons and not always because they are passionate about providing recreation opportunities for people living on low incomes. For some, particularly but not exclusively young front desk staff, it is simply a job that leads to a pay cheque. In contrast, other staff will, as one person put it, “trip over themselves” to provide leisure access assistance. There was no clear description of ‘leisure access work’ in this study because it entailed different things for different staff across the city. It depended on the individual and their personal values, the neighbourhood they worked in, the facilities available (ie. pool, ice rink, fitness centre), their community centre’s relation with a Community Association Board and also the relation with the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation. For some, leisure access work started and ended with distributing and collecting the paperwork for the LAC policy. For others, particularly those who worked in the poorest neighbourhoods, leisure access work extended to addressing some of the cross-cutting issues that accompany poverty, such as helping people find food, housing, employment, and providing free childcare.

“If they need food, I’ll give them food but I’ll help them find a way of getting food next time. If they need help with housing, I’ll go with them to the [Ministry of Housing] office but they’ll go with me and they’ll hopefully do most of the talking.”

Challenge 1: Financial Pressures

Increasing financial pressures on local governments place staff in compromised positions between budget cuts and an increasing demand for services (Thibault et al., 2004). Dealing with these pressures represents one of the major challenges in leisure access work. Seventeen staff discussed financial pressures to ‘do more with less’ and the two following quotes illustrate how that creates tensions for leisure access work:

“I think as recreation practitioners we feel as if we’re doing better work the more clients we’re serving, but there are financial pressures to make sure that you do perform at the expected budget level.”

“It’s interesting because you have the push to be customer friendly and to meet the demands of the public, because I believe that’s the reason why we exist, but it has to be tempered with our budget which is limited.”

Two different ways that staff dealt with financial pressures in leisure access work were limiting subsidies and raising revenue to supplement leisure access.

(i) Limiting subsidies. Some Community Association Boards accept the LAC towards Association programs but limit the amount and number of subsidies available. For example, some staff allowed LAC users to receive a 50% subsidy on certain programs only after they have reached a minimum number of registrants. As one person explained, “We couldn’t have a class fill up with LAC holders because it wouldn’t break even, and then we’re not fiscally responsible.” The problem this person acknowledged was an unfair message to LAC users that, unlike other patrons, they have to wait to register for programs and may not be allowed to register at all if costs are not covered. Another example was allowing patrons to receive a discount (e.g. 50%) on one or two programs per season. For some communities, this subsidy policy was ‘per family’ meaning that staff would have to explain that the subsidy would only accommodate one or two family members per season. This means that in larger families, some people miss out. Research shows that even when user fees are reduced, programs remain unaffordable to many people (Frisby, Reid & Ponic, 2007).

I found that leisure access opportunities were not well advertised and speculate this is related to financial pressures. Only one person admitted this: “We don’t advertise it. Once I advertise it, I would have so many people coming in for it.” This relates to previous research with low income citizens that showed that people who need the services often do not know they exist (Frisby et al., 2007).

(ii) Raising revenue to supplement leisure access. A few staff in this study negotiated financial pressures by making efforts to supplement the perceived cost of leisure access. Two staff

discussed generating a consistent revenue stream through their fitness centres to allow them to continue offering leisure access services. Other staff apply for grants from private and government agencies (most common in low income neighbourhoods).

Challenge 2: Not Enough Staff in LAC Office

There is usually only one person processing applications each day at the LAC office and with approximately 18,000 applicants a year, there is often a four to eight week waiting period for a LAC. This was a major concern for a number of staff who believe in the positive benefits of recreation because it meant patrons had to wait a considerable amount of time before they can start participating. One person suggested the wait period clashed with the organization's commitment to 'responsiveness':

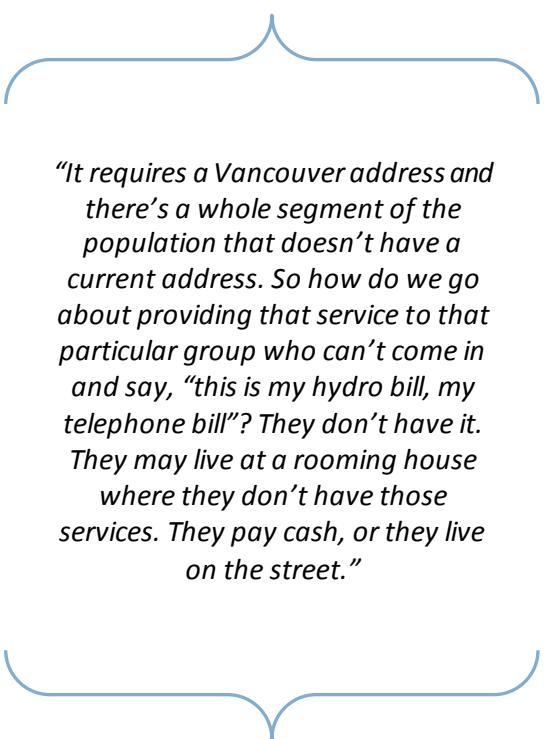
"When we're looking at a four to eight week time frame for people to be provided customer service, that to me does not suggest responsiveness."

There is currently no simplified renewal process so patrons who are renewing a LAC have to wait as well. Frustration with the wait period was a common complaint from the public that staff dealt with.

(i) Checking applications for completion. A way that five staff negotiated this challenge was to try and expedite the LAC process for patrons by looking over their applications before they were sent off to the LAC office to make sure all of the necessary documents were included and completed properly. Not all staff were comfortable doing this however, as it is private information.

Challenge 3: Limitations of Current Policy

No one in this study questioned the need for the LAC policy because all staff believed policy is necessary to have something in place to be able to justify offering services to people living on low incomes. The problem was that the current policy design was challenging to work with because of strict criteria and 'prove poverty' requirements that compromised staff's abilities to meet community needs. While this is common practice in leisure access work in large Canadian cities (Taylor & Frisby, 2010), having to prove poverty is a humiliating process for many and it has been criticized for being an invasion of privacy (Reid, 2004). Many staff in this study acknowledged that there is a negative stigma



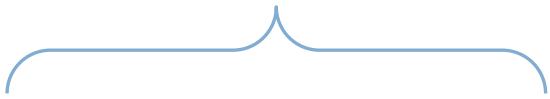
"It requires a Vancouver address and there's a whole segment of the population that doesn't have a current address. So how do we go about providing that service to that particular group who can't come in and say, "this is my hydro bill, my telephone bill"? They don't have it. They may live at a rooming house where they don't have those services. They pay cash, or they live on the street."

associated with the LAC and that it is embarrassing for some community members to ask for. Several staff felt the current requirements of the LAC exclude groups of people, including: 'working poor' with incomes slightly above the low income cut-off but lack discretionary funds for recreation, people with high medical expenses, people without a Vancouver address, and those currently in transition, living in a halfway home or homeless. The application requires a certain level of comprehension to be able to understand and fill out and is currently only available in English so those who do not have proficient English literacy or language skills are also excluded.

(i) Providing translation. Several staff across the city negotiated language differences by translating the applications. If staff cannot provide translation themselves, they often try to find another staff person who can, sometimes even soliciting help from other patrons. Two staff told me that if no one is available for translation they do their best to communicate through informal sign language. This does not occur in every community centre though as one person told me they have an in-house policy of not providing translating services because they could not handle the demand. Instead, they direct patrons to language services elsewhere (e.g. S.U.C.C.E.S.S.). Others say it depends on how busy the front desk is and the willingness of individual staff to help.

(ii) Outreach. Outreach efforts were another way that staff negotiated the perceived exclusionary nature of the LAC policy. These efforts did not have to be on a large scale as one person talked about noticing a mother in her community who suddenly pulled her children out of pay-per-use programs so she approached the mother to ask if she needed help. As it turned out, the family was undergoing a sudden financial crisis and could no longer afford the user fees for the children's recreation programs. Since the LAC is based on the previous year's tax assessment they did not qualify, so the staff person applied to the Community Association Board subsidy so the children could continue to participate. By reaching out to families in their communities some staff were able to reduce the onus on individuals to come forward and self-identify as needing financial assistance.

(iii) Working around policy. Over half the staff in this study negotiated perceived challenges with current policy by working around it in order to accommodate people needs. This is linked to the number of people that are excluded by current policy requirements but show a need for the service. One example was a woman who needed



"I started emailing everyone, can we please give her a leisure pass because she's going to paying clinic everyday? My heart was just absolutely with her, so I did my best. Few phone calls and few emails later, finally they approved and I gave her a leisure pass."



regular physical activity as therapy for an injury, but her medical expenses were so high that she could not afford the full cost of participation at her local community centre. Her income was only a few thousand dollars over the low income cut-off line so she was not technically eligible for a LAC, but a staff person pleaded her case and the woman was eventually given a LAC. Other staff encouraged community members to write down their circumstances on the LAC application. Examples like these show the compassion that recreation staff put into the work that they do and also the strong value that the organization places on participation. But, with the flexibility that some apply to the policy, comes an additional challenge: inconsistencies in policy implementation.

Challenge 4: Inconsistencies in Policy Implementation

The lack of consistency in the way the LAC policy was implemented across the city was a challenge for frontline staff, particularly those who worked in centres with a high number of LAC applicants. It was frustrating for many because in most cases they tried to follow the policy as outlined, requiring citizens to present certain documents to get the LAC, but they encounter citizens who get upset because they were not required to go through this same procedure at other community centres in the city. A few staff said that encountering reoccurring situations like these decreased frontline staff's sense of support for their work and some have witnessed their colleagues take on a more cynical approach to leisure access work because of these negative experiences.

(i) Wanting stricter procedures. Six staff discussed wanting more direction and clearer guidelines to improve consistency in the way leisure access work is done across the city. Many said there are 'gray areas' around the LAC policy and some front desk staff would like outlined procedures to follow when someone does not meet the eligibility criteria, for example, senior citizens who cannot provide proof of residence because they live with their children and do not have bills in their name. Stricter procedures, however, do not correspond with a system that is flexible and able to accommodate diverse needs. This was an ongoing dilemma that came out of the analysis and was a question I posed in the second focus group: "How can you have consistency but allow flexibility for different circumstances?" The response from one person was that you cannot because staff operate by their personal value system and approach their work accordingly. This question deserves more reflection at an organizational level.

Challenge 5: Perceived Abuse of the LAC Policy

Another challenge that staff struggled with in their work is negotiating what they call 'abuse' of the LAC policy. This term was used to describe situations where staff believed someone who did not live on low income was using a LAC, therefore taking advantage of the system. This was a prevalent concern in this study as 13 staff in total discussed examples of abuse and many

discussed hearing concerns from their colleagues. Several staff complained that high levels of abuse strain finances and compromise cost-recovery. One front desk staff person provided a rationale for why abuse is especially frustrating in community centres that operate under tight financial pressures:

"This program is great and there are many people who wouldn't be able to afford it without some financial help. But, on the other hand, when you see people who you know should not have one and we have no idea how they got one but they got one..."

When I asked why this was bothersome, the response was:

"They are actually taking money away from people who really need it. Because, guess what, if people who are abusing it and they can actually pay, we could have way more money and let's say offer free programs for kids who really need it and really deserve it."

While this excerpt provides more evidence of the amount of care that a number of staff put into their work and the value that many attribute towards leisure access, a negative consequence of repeatedly encountering situations of perceived abuse is a decrease in staff's sense of support for their work and less appreciation for the LAC policy. Abuse was not a concern for staff in community centres serving the Downtown Eastside.

(i) Not our place to judge. Several staff were quick to point out that appearances do not necessarily reflect one's actual financial situation so there may be instances where staff perceive someone to be abusing the system when in actuality they are not. Examples included people of certain cultures who believe that their wealth is to be transportable so they wear lots of expensive-looking jewelry, people who dress their best when using or applying for a LAC in order to counter some of the perceived negative stigma associated with leisure access, and people who have suddenly lost their job or home but still own an expensive-looking vehicle. A

"Lady comes in in a purple Cadillac, California plates. She's gone to the Aquatic Centre, she can't afford swim lessons but she wants to connect with other families with preschool children because she's here with her son and she's living with her parents in Vancouver. So the clerical says, "look it, she's driving a Cadillac for goodness sake. She can afford it!"...I go out to the parking lot to talk with her. I say: "What's your story?" She said: "Well, I left my abusive husband with a suitcase for me and my kid. I fled Northern California, came to live with my parents who are Welfare recipients. I have no money. I have no money in the bank. But I basically left because I was tired of getting beat up... My parents are on welfare, they have no money, they have this free swim pass and said why don't you go to the Aquatic Centre and little Johnny can take swim lessons and you can have fun, spend your day and meet some people and sort of get acclimatized to Vancouver... to make a long story short, I gave her the pass."

couple of staff argued that the latter is an extreme example, but nonetheless, it begs a number of questions, like:

- How can a policy have room to accommodate extreme circumstances while not encouraging abuse?
- How do you ward off abusers without stigmatizing the program?
- How do you attract the people that the program is ‘for’ while not threatening their dignity and holding up a sign that says this program is only for you if you are really legitimately poor?

Questions like these deserve further reflection at an organizational level.

Challenge 6: Not Being Heard

Several front desk staff expressed frustration in interviews and focus groups because stricter policy procedures had not yet been developed and perceived abuse was not being addressed. At first many people thought my study was part of a leisure access review by the Parks Board so I made a point of clarifying that the study was solely for my master’s degree and had no connection to the Parks Board. This seemed to disappoint people at first but they were pleased to hear that I would be submitting a summary report to the organization because it meant that their concerns would be put forward.

(i) Decreased appreciation for leisure access work. An unfortunate consequence of feeling as if their concerns were not being heard in their organization was that some staff had less appreciation for leisure access work. Several staff in this study witnessed this in their colleagues who work on the front desk. There is evidence of this in the social work literature where some social workers adopt a resentful approach to their work when they feel as if they cannot provoke change in their organization and are expected to carry out their work in ways they do not agree with (Dominelli, 2006). The danger is that if a minimized appreciation for leisure access work is translated into cynical or resentful approaches on the frontline of service delivery low income citizens will have an even more difficult time accessing municipal recreation as negative attitudes from staff and management have been found to create additional barriers to participation for marginalized citizens (Allison & Hibbler, 2004).

(ii) Voicing their ideas. Davidson Perlmutter and Cnaan (1999) found that frontline staff in a U.S. recreation department were discouraged from making recommendations or initiating new ideas because of tight budgets that allowed no room for creativity. Despite their findings, I found that some staff in Vancouver made efforts to have their ideas and concerns heard, communicating regularly with the LAC office and advocated on behalf of patrons who they felt

needed a LAC but did not qualify according to the policy criteria. Several staff reported a supportive relationship with the LAC program supervisor because she was receptive to their feedback.

In addition, many staff considered the interviews and focus groups as a venue to have their voices heard and perceived my study as hope for improvement in leisure access work, more specifically changes to the LAC policy that would reduce the challenges in their work. Recommendations from staff and the researcher are discussed next.

4. Recommendations

From Staff (in no particular order)

1) Improve lines of communication between management and frontline staff and between community centres. A key finding was that staff rarely discussed leisure access work with colleagues from other community centres.

It was apparent in focus groups they would like more opportunities to do so because this facilitates the sharing of experiences as well as effective tactics for negotiating and overcoming challenges.

2) Decrease wait time for patrons. Several staff felt that the current wait time for a LAC was unresponsiveness to citizen needs. Adding more staff to the LAC office is an obvious solution, but financial pressures and strained budgets make that unlikely. One idea was to relocate staff from pools undergoing maintenance to the LAC office for extra help during that time period (this would also serve as an educational

experience). Another idea is to implement an '8 weeks to expiry' alert on the Safari computer system so that staff could see when a patron's LAC is approaching an expiry date and remind them in-person to submit their application early enough to avoid a long wait time. Several staff would also like to see an expedited renewal process that requires less documentation.

3) Address issue of LAC abuse. The issue of LAC abuse needs to be addressed because many staff are frustrated and negative staff reactions may compromise the Park Board's values of inclusiveness and integrity. More thought is needed on how abusers of the system may be deterred while people who need the services continue to be welcomed. Several staff would like to see a dollar value attributed to the LAC. This does not mean adding a cost to users; rather it means there is a dollar amount associated with the card in order to try and increase respect for the card and signify to users that it is not simply 'the free swim pass'.

4) Develop more partnerships to reach more low income citizens. When I asked one focus group how it would be possible to inform low income citizens about the LAC policy while minimizing the associated negative stigma, I received "through our partners" as an immediate response. Staff would like to see current partnerships continued and more partnerships

'LAC blog'

With limited resources, it is unlikely to have regular in-person meetings. One idea presented in a focus group was to develop a 'LAC blog' where staff could log on and communicate with colleagues city-wide. This would be a place where people could talk about positive experiences and challenges. The LAC office could visit the blog once a week and respond to questions so that all staff using the blog are made aware of what to do in certain situations, ensuring greater consistency across the city.

developed in order to be able to identify and reach groups of people who could benefit from leisure access. Current and future partnerships discussed were: schools, family workers, social workers, DTES organizations, foodbanks, MoreSports, KidSport, and neighbourhood houses.

5) Provide LAC application in different languages. Previous research shows that language differences between recreation staff and community members are a significant barrier to outreach efforts (Allison & Hibbler, 2004). This is of utmost concern for Vancouver because of its diverse communities and high levels of immigration. Providing the LAC application in languages other than English was one of the most common recommendations from staff in this study; however, it is important to recognize that in order for the paperwork to be processed by LAC office staff it will likely have to be filled out in English, or in another language these staff people can understand. At the least, it is recommended that the LAC application include a statement in other languages saying what the form is, what language it needs to be filled out in and where people can go for translation services.

6) Educate frontline staff about significance of leisure access. In addition to educating the public about leisure access services, several staff recommended educating frontline staff about the significance of this important work since sometimes negative experiences alter the way people think about it. The most effective way of doing this was thought to be through stories from community members who have benefited positively from the LAC program, like the following story that was shared in a focus group.

"Filipino family came here to Vancouver, father was a doctor... couldn't find a job, but the thing is that he thought Vancouver was the best fit and they established themselves in the low income housing complex. The father made the decision to go back to the Philippines and re-establish his trade, work and send money to the family. The dad passed away a couple of years ago.

The thing was that the parent (the mother) didn't have enough money, all of the financial source was gone. So, we got the whole family onto the leisure access card and the child took up swimming and skating and that and now she's going to [a nearby high school] right now, and she's not a bad swimmer. She's even thinking of maybe becoming a lifeguard!

The leisure access card was the first thing that we thought, ok, no matter how terrible the thing that's happened to this family at least we have the opportunity to take them away from their bad life, put them in a swimming pool, put them in a rink. That's what our facilities are for."

From Researcher

(1) Revisit organizational philosophy. As leisure access work means different things to different staff all over the city, there is no unified philosophy guiding this work and that may be a contributing factor to the inconsistency in the way the LAC policy is implemented and regarded by staff and the public. Staff who work in community centres serving the DTES are guided by a unique philosophy centred on meeting needs in their communities and refusing to turn anyone away. It was through conversations with these particular staff that my eyes were opened to the important role that community centres can play in the lives of low income citizens. I recommend the organization revisit its philosophy towards leisure access and reflect on some of the questions that have been posed in this report. It is important to ask what the objectives are and whether or not they correspond with the organization's values of integrity, responsiveness, learning, leadership, inclusiveness, and accountability.

(2) Include frontline staff and the community in policy discussions. Frontline staff have a unique perspective on the needs in their communities and have great ideas for improving leisure access work. I recommend that they be included in future discussions on policy evaluation and policy development, as I have learned that their insight is very informative. Previous research urges that community members be included in these processes as well since they know best how their needs and interests may be met (Frisby & Millar, 2002).

(3) Consider using the term “inclusion” in place of leisure access. Many of the staff I had the pleasure of speaking with were concerned about more than just getting low income citizens in the doors of their community centres, which is what is suggested by the term “access”. The literature discusses a number of factors that must be met for low income citizens to feel included in recreation: a safe environment, supportive social networks, moral and economic support, autonomy and control, and attention to barriers beyond cost like transportation and childcare (Donnelly & Coakley, 2002; Frisby et al., 2007). Considering this, some staff in Vancouver are doing “inclusion” work as they make sure people feel welcome in their centres and have positive participation experiences. Inclusion is the term being used in recently published documents from the Everybody Active initiative by BCRPA. I recommend that the term inclusion be used in future Vancouver policies regarding leisure access work, ie. consider developing an ‘Inclusion Policy’.

5. Conclusion

This research is important for the many staff who are involved in this work across the City of Vancouver, to the approximate 18,000 who are using the LAC policy, and to all those who could use the policy but are deterred by how it is implemented. It is likely that similar findings exist in recreation departments across the province because when I presented at the British Columbia Recreation and Parks Association 2010 Symposium, many recreation practitioners from different municipalities nodded their heads in agreement as I discussed the conflicting values in this work and the major challenges that were revealed in my study (Scott & Cureton, 2010). It is my hope that this summary report is helpful to the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation and will lead to further discussions among staff, management, politicians, Community Association Boards, and citizens about leisure access work and how challenges can be overcome so that staff may continue to pursue this important work.

Kathryn Cureton's Master's thesis and the complete reference list can be downloaded from The University of British Columbia Information Repository at: <https://circle.ubc.ca>

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