

## **School for Deaf to Face Civil Suit , Alberta**

JUSTICE Former students allege physical, sexual abuse, lawyer says

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The Telegram

The Newfoundland School for the Deaf and provincial government will soon be facing a civil class-action lawsuit alleging students were subject to physical and sexual abuse at the school, an Alberta lawyer says.

Tony Merchant, who specializes in class-action lawsuits representing a large number of people with similar claims, says his Newfoundland case will be ready in the next few months.

Merchant launched a suit with similar claims in Alberta provincial court last week, and says he is preparing cases in seven other provinces.

He says schools for deaf children in Canada had systemic problems until the 1990s.

"(Deaf children) were perfect victims, because they weren't going home to their families, and they weren't allowed to communicate, and they lived anyway in a largely solitary world," Merchant says.

"So when bad things happened to them, and a lot of bad things happened to a lot of people, they just internalized these things and didn't talk about it."

Students at deaf schools were not allowed to speak American Sign Language, because they were learning to speak verbally and lip read.

Merchant says a man from Newfoundland has told him that their arms were tied behind their backs to stop them from signing.

Also, male and female teachers and staff worked at schools for the deaf.

"So you had males - not just teachers, but other staff - with the dangers of

access to female students," he says.

Merchant says they have a number of allegations against the Newfoundland School for the Deaf. Although he would not say specifically what the claims are, he said they are similar to the claims in the Alberta case, which include rape, and physical and sexual abuse.

While most of the claims involve staff abusing students, he says in some of them, older students are alleged to have abused younger students.

A spokesman for the Department of Justice declined comment, saying they have not yet received any legal papers.

Merchant would not say how many people have come forward in the Newfoundland case, but says, "It's a lot of people - but we're anxious to hear from others as well."

About 3,000 students attended the Newfoundland School for the Deaf between 1964 and 1996.

He says Newfoundland students were even more at risk before 1964, when students were taken by boat to the schools in Halifax, Amherst and Montreal.

"For the people from Newfoundland, because of distance and because many were in the outports, they would never go home on weekends," Merchant says.

The provincial government paid for students to travel and attend the schools in other provinces, so, he says, they are responsible.

Civil case

Merchant says he will re-open a claim from a 1993 criminal case against a former supervisor and counselor at the School for the Deaf. The defendant was found not guilty of charges involving seven female students.

"We view that person to have a good claim as well, even though there was a failure to find guilty of rape," Merchant says. "It's still a matter that would result in civil liability because the school and their authorities are

not permitted to take that kind of advantage of young girls."

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