

Autism organization 'concerned' at Ford government's overhaul plan

Written By MIKE BAKER

The organization tasked with representing thousands of people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Ontario has admitted to being 'concerned' with the provincial government's plan to revamp the Ontario Autism Program. Announced back on Feb. 7, Ontario's Community and Social Services Minister Lisa MacLeod promised impending changes, slated to come in on April 1, would clear 'horrendous' waitlists for autism-related services in the province. 'The Ontario government invests \$321 million each year in autism supports that, under the current system, leaves three out of four children behind,' Ms. MacLeod said. 'I cannot in good conscience continue this liberal plan that was more about politics than the people it should be supporting.' Ms. MacLeod estimated that approximately 2,400 families in Ontario are waiting for a diagnostic assessment, with more than 23,000 families waiting for behavioural services through the current OAP program. Through the changes, the government plans to clear that waitlist within 18 months. Also included is a plan to introduce a 'childhood budget', which Ms. MacLeod notes will allow families to choose the services they wish to provide to their children. Funding under this initiative will only be available to children up to the age of 18. While details are still to be officially confirmed, the program states that families will be eligible for up to \$20,000 a year (to a maximum of \$140,000 accumulative) to support children under the age of six, while youth older than that will be eligible for \$5,000 a year (to a maximum of \$55,000 accumulative). The government has confirmed that only families earning less than \$55,000 a year in net income will qualify for the full funding amounts. 'These changes will ensure that every child will receive assistance, rather than just 25 percent of families who currently receive support,' a release from local MPP Sylvia Jones' office reads. Despite this, Autism Ontario has voiced its concern. After initially supporting some aspects of the revamp in a release to media, the organization has this week attempted to clarify that statement. 'Autism Ontario neither proposed, nor endorsed the announced changes to the OAP and is concerned about the impact these changes will have on children and families accessing the program,' Autism Ontario says. Initially, the organization stated the government's announcement 'echoes what Autism Ontario hears from families across the province', noting extensive wait times was one of the largest barriers to people accessing diagnostic and required services. In a survey rolled out last year, Autism Ontario noted 66.4 percent of families polled indicated they wanted a direct funding model in Ontario. 'Families wanted the ability to choose their own service provider and control the timing and location of their treatment. This new program addresses that expressed desire,' an Autism Ontario spokesperson said. 'With that in mind, the proposed funding options, up until the age of 18, will suit the needs of some families, but not all. This does not address the varied support needs.' The release indicated that some families in Ontario pay between \$60,000 and \$80,000 a year for evidence-based intervention and that this funding change would severely hinder most people's ability to continue with expensive treatments. Dufferin Child and Family Services (DCAFS) is the regional entity responsible for assisting families that require autism-related services for children. The organization's Executive Director Jennifer Moore is adopting something of a 'wait and see' attitude to the proposed changes. 'We look forward to learning more about the details of this new approach to addressing waitlist and other such issues related to autism services in Ontario,' Ms. Moore said. 'As a multi-service agency, DCAFS will be looking at how we can best support and work collaboratively with children and youth living with autism, along with their families, within this new model.' She added, 'All children and youth deserve the support they require to meet their full potential.' Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones spoke favourably about the proposed changes, noting the revamp was a tremendous step forward for autism-related services in Ontario. 'I have been working for many years with families across Ontario and with numerous Dufferin-Caledon parents who are frustrated that their children who have autism are not able to get the services and programs they need to succeed,' Ms. Jones said. 'It is simply unacceptable that waitlists continue to grow. We are going to ensure that no family has to wait over two years to receive the support their children deserve and need.' For more information on the proposed changes, visit www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/specialneeds/autism/ontario-autism-program.aspx