

Ontario provides support for families of children on the autism spectrum

Written By MIKE BAKER

Ontario is providing families in the Ontario Autism Program (OAP) with services to support their child's ongoing learning and development. Foundational family services such as family and peer mentoring, caregiver workshops and coaching will be tailored to the unique regional and cultural needs in different communities.

These services will build on existing virtual and remote options introduced during the COVID-19 outbreak. The first phase of foundational family services is part of the ongoing implementation of the new needs-based, sustainable and family-centred OAP.

Feedback received through public consultations and the OAP Advisory Panel highlighted the importance of having ongoing capacity-building supports available to families, said Todd Smith, Minister of Children, Community and Social Services. That's why family supports that put children at the centre of care are a key element of our new needs-based Ontario Autism Program. We know having virtual services as an option during this challenging time has become critical to families and service providers.

The first phase of foundational family services launched Aug. 7. Services will be offered at no cost in a variety of formats with individual and group supports and virtual and in-person sessions. Options may vary during the first phase of implementation as providers continue to expand their services and as COVID-19 restrictions are lifted. For example, families may participate in an online group workshop to learn strategies to help toilet train their child and then receive one-on-one clinical follow-up afterward, or they may access coaching sessions to help with managing challenging behaviours. The services are based on a family's changing needs over time and their child's needs, strengths and developmental stage.

In these unprecedented times, the needs of children and youth on the autism spectrum and their families are greater than ever, said Marg Spoelstra, co-chair, OAP Advisory Panel. It is encouraging to see the new foundational family services being implemented province-wide as recommended by the panel and now through the sustained efforts of the OAP Implementation Working Group.

Families can contact select Ontario Autism Program service providers to learn more about the types of supports currently available in their community.

Ontario's publicly supported providers are ready to increase their offerings for this essential component of the new OAP, said Jennifer Churchill, CEO of Empowered Kids Ontario - Enfants Avenir Ontario. Building on the system that is in place aligns with the recommendations of the OAP Advisory Panel. The government is responding and that's good news.

Since announcing the new needs-based Ontario Autism Program in December 2019, the ministry has:

- launched a variety of interim early years supports focused on younger children on the wait list to help build skills in social communication, engagement, speech and language and emotional regulation.

- made it easier for families to receive funding by streamlining and reducing administrative steps.

- Begun development of a new user-friendly family website, the future one-stop-shop to register for the OAP, apply for funding and get updates on status in the program.

We are working extremely hard to implement an Ontario Autism Program built by the community, for the community that supports the needs of families and their children, said Minister Smith. This significant transformation will lead us to a sustainable, needs-based program that will provide all families access to supports and services no matter where they live in Ontario.

Foundational family services are one of many service pathways that families will have access to in the new Ontario Autism

Program.

These pathways include accessing: Core services like Applied Behaviour Analysis, speech language pathology, occupational therapy and mental health services; Early intervention and school readiness services to help young children access critical services when they will benefit most, and to prepare them to enter school; and Urgent and complex needs services to support children and youth who are in service, or are waiting for service, and have significant and immediate needs.

In July 2019, the Ontario Autism Program budget was increased from approximately \$300 million to \$600 million annually to help ensure it is both needs-based and sustainable moving forward.