

Providing autism support

BY SYLVIA JONES

During my time as an opposition member, I met with many families in Dufferin-Caledon who were pleading for help because their child with autism was being left behind. Parents told me that they felt their child's needs were irreparably harmed by the inaction from the previous government and that something needed to be done because their child could not wait for services.

For many years children with autism were sitting on wait lists; first for a diagnosis, then another wait list for an assessment to determine what services and supports were needed, and then, to add insult to injury, those children were additionally wait listed to receive those services and support.

Each year that went by was agonizing for parents. Demands for action from parents steadily got louder. The previous government continued to ignore the growing appeals for help, after their ill-conceived plan to cut wait times by removing the hope of ever receiving services to any child who had already reached their 5th birthday.

Currently, there is an estimated 23,000 children in the province who are still languishing on a wait list for autism services. Our government has created a plan to clear that wait list within 18 months.

I am pleased that my colleague, the Minister of Children, Community and Social Services, Lisa MacLeod announced more support for children with autism.

Right now, the autism support system that we have inherited from the previous government leaves 3 out of 4 children behind. We need to change the system in order to provide more support and services to the children in need and their families.

Under the government's proposed reforms, the wait list for funding will be cleared within 18 months. Under the proposed reforms, Ontarians will be treated with fairness. We want to create a system that is more accountable, and a system that will guarantee that support is there for families with the greatest need ? now and in the future.

With the proposed changes, families may receive a Childhood Budget until their child's 18th birthday. The amount of the budget will depend on the length of time a child is in the program. For example, a child entering the program at age two would be eligible to receive up to \$140,000, while a child entering the program at age seven would receive up to \$55,000. These changes will ensure that every child will receive assistance, rather than the 25 percent of families who currently receive support.

In order to be eligible for the Ontario Autism Program, a child has to be diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Families can apply for funding for their children aged 18 and below. Evidence shows that children who receive behavioural intervention therapy early (between the age of two and five) will have the best long-term outcomes with improvements in cognitive development, school preparation and language development.

To be connected to a diagnosis hub call 1-888-284-8340. There are five diagnostic hubs in the province. These hubs will be receiving additional funding, over the next two years, to help increase their service time for a diagnosis and to provide behavioural treatment sooner.

Our plan gives families who need help, the choice to determine what is best for their child's individual needs. Families have said that the current system is broken and we have taken action to improve access to service.

If you have any questions about the Ontario Autism Program, please email me at sylvia.jonesco@pc.ola.org or call 1-800-265-1603.