



ONTARIO AUTISM COALITION

BRIEFING NOTE

Ontario Autism Program

Issue

- The government's redesign of the Ontario Autism Program (OAP) has acknowledged the importance of services based on need; however, necessary improvements are urgently needed to address continued inequities and barriers to accessing clinical therapies.
- The OAP is relied upon by more than 60,000 autistic children and youth and their families. These families have registered their children to the OAP to seek support in accessing education, development of lifeskills, ensuring their children's safety, avoiding crisis, and preparing for the rest of their lives.
- We are invested in seeing a truly needs based OAP that will recognize individual need, respect clinical recommendations and offer reasonable wait times to yield the most positive outcomes for autistic children and their families.

Background

- The Childhood Budget Plan was highly protested by the autism community due to the discriminatory nature of funding based on age and disregard for the individual needs of autistic children and youth.
- Improvements such as an increased budget, the addition of Speech Therapy, Occupational Therapy and Mental Health supports are welcomed; however, the "new" program bears an uncanny resemblance to the plan announced in February 2019.
- Over the past 4 years, we have seen a slow roll-out that failed to prioritize the most needed services, countless barriers raised, a growing waitlist and the removal of clinically guided funding allocation.
- Information accessed via FOI indicated that only 1511 children had funded agreements as of October 31, 2022. This included the 888 children invited out of waitlist order to participate in the 'test phase' of Core Services between April 2021 and April 2022.
- The 'more than 40,000 children' accessing OAP 'supports' are those who received Interim One Time Funding, and one additional payment: a temporary payment for select children based on age that did NOT ensure continuous transition into a continuous service contract. For families purchasing clinical services, this was spent quickly with no transition plan.
- The launch of AccessOAP's management of the OAP has sparked movement, but despite a more 'accessible' platform, families registered for the OAP are experiencing confusion, inconsistent information (or lack thereof), the inability to resolve administrative issues, and overall confusion. Low response rate with AccessOAP is due to disjointed communication with families; not disinterest.
- The concerns of 2019; namely, exceedingly long wait times, discriminatory, age-based funding, the dismissal of clinical recommendations, a lack of service capacity and general lack of transparency – still exist.

Our Position

- **Wait Times.** The wait for individualized, clinical services cannot be years. Whereas the new OAP's Early Years programming can be offered with little wait time – these programs are not accessible to everyone, download responsibility onto families to drive programming, are not suitable for children with severe needs, and are age-based and time limited. The wait for Core Services is unacceptable, and prevents children from accessing therapy during a critical period of learning.
Recommendation: The funding and delivery for Core Services must be prioritized over other pillars of support.
- **Clinical Guidance.** Families want to choose what is best for their children; however, clinical guidance is necessary. A therapy plan must be developed by a clinician in consultation with the family. The Determination of Need process

undermines the role of the clinician, downloads a heavy burden on families not only to articulate their child's needs, but to develop a therapy plan on their own. The method by which funding is allocated is subjective, non-clinical, emphasizes language, cultural and socio-economic barriers and is of unknown origin.

Recommendation: The Determination of Need process must be revisited, cannot feasibly be carried out yearly, and should do nothing more than *forecast* the level of funding a child may require.

- **Age Caps.** A person's age offers no significance to the level or intensity of support they require. If adequate therapies, supports and interventions were accessed in a timely fashion, then it is reasonable to consider that need may decrease over time. However, an individual's needs will not steadily decrease over time, and will always be susceptible to change. Nor is it reasonable to conclude that a child diagnosed late, or who spent years on a waitlist is deserving of a lower funding allocation. Age-based funding is discriminatory and disregards the needs of children with severe diagnoses and high risk behaviours.

Recommendation: Age caps must be removed. Children should not be penalized on their 10th and 14th birthdays. A child exhibiting need that is deserving of 'extensive' funding should be able to receive it regardless of how old they are.

- **Capacity.** Funding issued to families does not guarantee access to service. Wait times exist in the private sector, and Northern, Rural and Remote areas of the province do not have the service availability or accessibility to meet demand. Providing funding, even after years of waiting, offers no assurances that a child will ever be able to benefit from it.

Recommendation: A robust plan is needed to incentivize entry into the field of autism therapies, to ensure reliable funding flow to the private sector and to bring more service providers to underserved regions that are not only available but accessible as well.

- **Transparency.** Knowing that access to therapies is years long is devastating. Not knowing anything at all is worse. Families need information in order to plan their children's school schedules, child care, privately-funded therapy plans and every aspect of their lives that will cater to prioritizing these things. Information should be accessible and offer some clarity to families desperate for guidance and direction.

Recommendation: Minister Fullerton should address the community, for the first time face to face and be open to questions from the media. Policies should be published to allow for appropriate planning time and transitions. Information sharing from all points of contact with the Ministry and AccessOAP should be consistent. Targets for the upcoming year should be communicated as well as current registration and intake numbers.

Moving Forward

- We would welcome and appreciate ongoing dialogue with members of government and the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services to share constructive feedback, offer user-end insight and report concerns from our community.
- A program that addresses the individual needs of autistic children and youth in allocating equitable funding amounts based on clinical recommendation is within reach. We are ready to help you get there.
- We are invested in the success of the Ontario Autism Program. In turn we are invested in you.

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