

BULLETIN

EIBI program shuts down

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PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT ELIMINATES INTERVENTION PROGRAM WITH PROVEN RESULTS

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, staff at the Queen Alexandra Centre for Children on Vancouver Island met a little boy. He was four years old, but he couldn't speak. Unlike other children his age, he couldn't ask his parents questions about the world or describe to them his daily adventures. Instead, he hid under tables, screaming and hitting. He was cut off completely.

A few weeks ago, that boy, now some years older, stood at a microphone and spoke to hundreds of people gathered on the lawn of the Legislature in Victoria. He called on the provincial government to reconsider recent cuts to autism funding ... cuts that will shut down the Queen Alexandra program on January 31 and lay off the 40 professionals who work there.

In September, Children and Family Development Minister Mary Polak announced the elimination of funding for the Early Intensive Behaviour Intervention program. In addition to shutting down the program at Queen Alexandra, the cuts will affect other facilities in BC.

For parents of children just starting the program, the news is devastating.

"They're scared," says Noel Davies, an intervention worker at Queen Alexandra. "They feel like this is a fatal blow to their family. That any hope they had for their child has been wiped out. It's devastating."

Davies explains that in place of the program, which offers up to 20 hours a week of intensive therapy, parents will have to get by with a small increase to basic annual funding.

"Parents will now get \$22,000 a year, but I don't think that extra \$2000 is going to help them at all.

"It's enough for them to pay for 5 to 7 hours a week of therapy, but 20 hours is the minimum we should be providing a child.

"So unless they have the money to pay the difference, their child will go without the therapy they need."

Davies points out that there can be no fiscal justification for eliminating the program. While it costs \$70,000 a year per child, this early investment not only gives the children a future, but saves millions of dollars in the long run.

"It costs \$280,000 to put a child through four years of this therapy. That sounds like a lot but compare that to the \$2 million it costs to care for this child over his lifetime if he doesn't get the therapy."

HSA President Reid Johnson agrees. "The elimination of this program is short-sighted," he says. "A child who

has had the benefit of intensive therapy will need far fewer costly medical or mental health interventions and social assistance later in life," he said.

Johnson adds that HSA members continue to advocate for the children and their families even as they face job loss.

-Their own future is uncertain, and they are extremely concerned about the children and families who have been left without the treatment they need to give their kids a fighting chance," Johnson said.

Davies has just started working with another little boy who, like the boy who spoke at the Legislature recently, came to the program with no ability to communicate.

-After just one year in the program hes already showing great progress. He can use pictures from a binder to tell me what he needs and say things like "I want a snack.\ But with the end of the program, this little boy may not get the help he needs.

-I just dont know whats going to happen to this kid," says Davies. -Its really scary. This is his only chance, and its being stolen from him."

Johnson vows the fight will continue.

-HSA will continue to work with families to fight this attack on the most vulnerable children in our province."

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180 East Columbia
New Westminster, BC V3L 0G7

Website
www.hsabc.org

Telephone 604-517-0994
1-800-663-2017