

BULLETIN

## A sad anniversary

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THIS PAST SEPTEMBER 16 marked a sad anniversary for children with special needs in this province. Last year on this date, BCs Children and Family Development Minister Mary Polak announced funding cuts of more than \$3 million for autism services for children under age six.

As a result of this decision, Victorias Queen Alexandra Centre for Child Health laid off 40 highly trained behavioural interventionists and closed its autism behaviour intervention program.

This was a program that made breakthroughs with autistic children, releasing kids from a lifelong sentence of isolation and costly supported living. Intensive behavioural interventionists collaborated with the centres occupational therapists, physiotherapists, speech language pathologists, and other staff to make a successful, long-term experience for autistic children.

The program cost about \$70,000 for three or four years of intensive treatment. That investment may seem steep, but compare this to the alternative: studies estimate that if left untreated, caring for autistic individuals over the course of their lives costs about \$2 million per person.

In her announcement last September, Minister Polak tried to disguise this cut as an improvement in service, claiming that eliminating Queen Alexandras \$5 million intensive therapy program allows the government to increase funding for all autistic children under age 6 from \$20,000 to \$22,000. Given the number of autistic children in the province, this actually reduced overall funding to the under 6 group by more than \$3 million.

Meanwhile, the \$2,000 per child increase barely covers the new HST charged on the service costs that families must now pay.

Its disheartening that Minister Polak is still trying to mislead the public with the same faulty arguments claiming autistic children still receive adequate services. Parents of autistic children know better ... they say the program closure has been devastating. Families are reporting almost universal regression in the children who were cut from the program.

Putting aside the human impact of giving children and their families a shot at life lived to its full potential, funding early autism intervention programs saves money. Why is the government ignoring that?

If Health Minister Kevin Falcon were really serious about saving money in the health care system, hed take a look at the fiscal impact of this and other short-sighted cuts announced all over the province. 

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