

EMBATTLED MINISTER FAILS ASD KIDS

On Friday, B.C.'s last centre offering intensive autism treatment for children under 6 closed its doors. The provincial government had cancelled all funding, eliminated 42 jobs and cut adrift all the children currently being treated and all those on the waiting list.

Initially, Children and Families Minister Mary Polak claimed that the Early Intensive Behavioural Intervention (EIBI) program was not effective. It was quickly made clear by the autism community that this statement was inaccurate, at which point the government's rationale changed to one of "fairness."

Minister Polak maintains that the limited funds available must be more evenly distributed throughout the province, citing service delivery shortfalls in rural areas. This is the reason given for cutting the \$5 million EIBI program. A small portion of this amount will be given to all ASD children, in the form of a \$2000 annual funding increase. How the remaining funds will be spent is unclear.

Concurrently, \$20 million has been made available to put towards building a privately run autism research centre, to be located on the Lower Mainland. How this will benefit rural families has not been elucidated.

Overall, children on the spectrum have been disastrously let down by this minister and this government. Despite a Throne Speech promise to build the country's best system of support for children and youth with special needs, Minister Polak and Premier Campbell are not simply neglecting, but damaging the children in their care.

All other social services will suffer as a result of this decision. Children with autism not adequately treated will require more support in school, costing an already impoverished education system. Lifelong health care costs for these children can top \$2.5 million above average. Many will go on to be reliant on the state for the rest of their lives and some will become involved with the youth justice system.

These combined expenses far outweigh the EIBI program's cost. This government has made an economically foolish decision, in addition to the incalculable loss of human potential.

Clearly, children are not a priority for the Campbell government. Minister Polak has also failed those she has been charged with protecting. For this reason, the members of FAIR (Fighting Autism Intervention Reductions), Moms on the Move and our supporters are holding a candlelight vigil in front of the B.C. Legislature to mourn the loss of our children's treatment and to let Minister Polak and Premier Campbell know that we will continue to advocate for children with autism; our own, those waiting to be diagnosed and those not yet born.

Anyone interested in attending the vigil should gather on the Legislature front steps at 4:30. Please bring a candle if possible and, if you can, a white balloon.

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