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Emily will get the help she needs: Provincial Government reverses decision on Autism cuts

By Marni Walsh

This week, the Ontario Government made an about-face with newly appointed Minister of Children and Youth Services Michael Coteau and reversed the age limit on funding for intensive behavioural intervention (IBI) therapy for children with autism.

This was hailed as good news for Ontario children, like five year old Emily McDowell who will now continue to benefit from the life changing therapy.

?Every single child will receive the service they need,? said the new Minister in an early morning press conference on Tuesday. ?The new program will provide all children, no matter how old they are with the level of intensity they require.?

The reversal is due largely to the pressure parents and experts put on the Provincial Government by gathering forces and disputing changes that would have limited IBI only to kids under five years of age. Letter writing campaigns, petitions, and a number of loud protests across the province, as well as pressure from local politicians and municipal councils could not be ignored.

Emily's parents, Kelly and her husband Julian McDowell, were very active in pushing back against the governments' plan for limiting therapy by age ? spending long days attending rallies, speaking with politicians, and the Minister responsible, as well as convincing local councils to pass resolutions against the changes.

?At this point,? says Kelly, ?I am extremely happy that there has been some progress made and that families with children over five, who were kicked off the waitlist, will now be able to directly fund appropriate therapies while they await the new EABA program in June 2017.

?The support of our local council at the Town of Shelburne was crucial in strengthening the message to the provincial government. Shelburne's resolution spurred over 50 municipalities and some regions, which have all passed resolutions in support of autistic children. I am proud to say Shelburne was the first in all of Ontario to stand up for the rights of these vulnerable children - thank goodness we live in Dufferin County, where families and children are a priority. I thank Amaranth, Melancthon, Mulmur and Orangeville councils for addressing this issue, passing the resolution and for the very honest words that were spoken at the meetings I attend during their consideration of the resolution.?

Ontario PC Critic for Children and Youth Services, Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones said in a press release Tuesday, ?Today's announcement signals the Minister has listened to the concerns raised by thousands of parents, experts, organizations, municipalities and both opposition parties regarding the government's original decision to remove children over the age of five from receiving Intensive Behavioural Intervention (IBI) therapy.?

In March, the Liberal provincial government announced an unprecedented $333 million in funding for autism programs, but also removed funding for intensive therapy for children over five years old. Another $200,000,000 will be added to that cost to make sure no child is left behind.

?There are still details being worked out regarding the children currently in service and the year of transition ahead for them, and children under 5 on waitlists,? says Kelly. ?Details will be released in the coming days which will provide answers to a lot of the outlying questions. We are all hoping that based on the announcement the ongoing changes will be positive and will continue to consider the health and welfare of these children and not just the bottom line.?

MPP Jones says her party looks ?forward to reviewing details of the government's plan,? and ?will continue to advocate on behalf of

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affected families as the government moves forward with implementation.?

?Every child deserves access to life-changing therapy, and I look forward to continue working on ensuring every child in Ontario reaches their fullest potential,? she says.