

Strengthened in-school autism support among changes

continued from p.5

"Some people have made comments that we can't make a difference on this because it's at the provincial level. But the 49 municipalities, including Milton, Oakville and Halton Hills, have all made that (program change) possible. Advocacy at our level toward the Province can work."

Cluett also largely credited parents and their intensive efforts to stop the autism program changes as a major factor in the Province's about-face.

"It's only because of thousands of parents advocating, attending rallies, talking to their MPPs, talking to members of council, that's what got it done," he said.

Among those advocates is local resident Jeannie White, who appeared before council June 27 with fellow supporter Melanie Fox to share her personal story and urge councillors to support the motion.

White told council about her three-year-old autistic nephew, who was added to the government's IBI therapy wait list in April 2015 and told it could be more than two years before he receives service.

Not wanting to wait, the family banded together to privately pay for the therapy at a cost of about \$40,000 per year.

"We're not wealthy people, but as a family we're trying to work together to provide the much-needed support," she said. "Families are selling their homes to be able to pay for this."

While the families who were slated for removal from the wait list were originally going to receive a one-time payment of \$8,000 to pay for private services, that amount is now being increased to successive payments of \$10,000 that will be made available for families for continuous service until their child enters the new autism program

next year.

Other changes stemming from the Province's June 28 announcement include:

- Strengthened in-school autism supports to help children transition to and continue in full-time school
- Increased access to diagnostic assessments to allow for earlier diagnosis and treatment
- Greater access to information and direct supports for families to help them navigate the transition to the new program.

While the Ontario Autism Program was originally slated to begin in 2018, it will now come into effect next June, cutting the transition period in half.

The changes are being lauded by many representing the autism community, such as the Ontario Autism Coalition.

"We are delighted that the government has recognized the

urgency of the need to move forward with the accelerated implementation and the assurance that the 2,200 children removed from the waiting list are not left behind while also ensuring the needs of those in service continue to be met," said a statement from the coalition. "This program will be addressing the unique individualized clinical needs of each child with autism living in the province of Ontario."

In light of the changes at the provincial level, Cluett said he will likely amend his motion before he brings it forward at the Halton Council table.

"We want to make sure the advocacy for change continues," he said. "I will continue my call for the Province to come up with an overall autism strategy that will deal with people from a young age into their teens and then adulthood. This is not something that will go away."



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