

Halton chapter of Autism Coalition of Ontario protests budget cuts

By Kathryn Boyle
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Autism programming received a hefty cut this past month, and a local organization is fighting to get it back.

On May 2, the Halton chapter of the Autism Coalition of Ontario (ACO) took to Mountainview Rd., outside the office of Wellington-Halton Hills MP Michael Chong, with signs and music to get the message out there: we need this funding and we need it now.

In April, the Liberal government announced a new Ontario Autism Program with \$333 million in funding. The problem: children with autism are diagnosed within one and three years of age, and with waitlists of one to two years, they may never see the type of therapy they need to function in society.

Jennifer Hicks, a resident of Georgetown and the Halton ACO, stood with the group asking for support to get the funding back

not just for the children all over Canada, but her own child, Lili Anna.

At 16 months, Hicks suspected her daughter had autism and pursued doctor visits. But it was only in March of this year, when Lili Anna was four, that she was officially diagnosed and was put on a waitlist for Intensive Behavioural Intervention (IBI) therapy.

With the cut in funding, IBI therapy is inaccessible for children over five years old, and with Lili Anna on the waitlist, she will never receive that type of therapy.

IBI is the best solution for (Lili Anna), Hicks said. Except it's going to take 20 months to see a paediatrician. And because of that, she is not going to get it.

Lili Anna will instead receive Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA) therapy, which Hicks plans on utilizing the best the family can.

My concern is that it's not the right type of therapy, she said. It is not appropriate for classroom integration.

With Lili Anna and other children needing IBI therapy, integrating them into the classroom will not only affect the children with behavioural problems, but the other children in the class as well.

Instead of guising the \$333 million as a good thing, put that money into shorter waitlists, Hicks said.

The coalition has been hosting rallies all over the region, including Milton and Oakville, and Hicks promises they will continue until they see more funding. The conversation continues nationally through social media with the hashtag #AutismDoesntEndAt5.

On May 13, the coalition is hosting a pop-up rally at 1 p.m. at the Georgetown Public Library

where they will also sit down and meet with Wellington-Halton Hills MPP Ted Arnett. Everyone is welcome to join.



Local residents protesting the recent funding cuts to autism programming stand outside Wellington-Halton Hills MP Michael Chong's office on Mountainview Road in Georgetown on May 2. Photo by Kathryn Boyle

MPP Arnett: government can't abandon children with autism

The Ontario Government needs to support all children living with autism, says Wellington-Halton Hills MPP Ted Arnett.

In Question Period on May 5, in response to the Government's decision to curb funding for Intensive Behavioural Intervention (IBI) therapy for children who have autism, Arnett raised the example of Meghan Graham and her son Daniel.

I have heard from Meghan Graham, who grew up in Elora, Arnett told Premier Kathleen Wynne. Her son Daniel is autistic. Daniel needed, received, and benefited from IBI therapy from the ages of seven to nine, and he has made great strides. Daniel's mom has passionately made the case that all autistic children need to be able to access IBI therapy.

Arnett's question was part of an effort by the Ontario PC Caucus to focus attention on the Liberal Government's mistaken decision to end funding for IBI therapy for autistic children five

years of age or older. The Ontario PC Caucus dedicated every question during Question Period on May 5 to sharing the stories of children from across the Province who are affected by autism.

According to published reports, under the Liberal plan, the Government will limit funding for IBI therapy to children between the ages of two and four. Families with children five years of age or older who are currently on the wait list for IBI therapy will have their names removed from the list and receive a one-time payment of \$8,000.

We need the Premier to stand up in this House, acknowledge that autism doesn't end at age five, and say, We're going to find a way to eliminate these wait-lists and help all autistic children, including those older than five, to reach their full potential, and then work hard to bring truth to that statement, Arnett concluded. Why won't she do that?

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