

# 'WE ARE IN CRISIS'

## PARENTS, COUNCIL PUSH PROVINCE TO FAST-TRACK AUTISM PROGRAM

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For more than 900 days, Stacy Kennedy's nine-year-old son has sat on the Ontario autism wait list, awaiting his turn for crucial therapies.

"I've never waited two and a half years to access health care in this province. Have you?" asked the Oakville mother amid tears as she addressed regional councillors on the topic. "The message is loud and clear — our families do not matter. They (the provincial government) know we are in crisis, and they do nothing."

With stories like this in

mind, Halton council unanimously passed a motion at its most recent meeting, calling on the province to take immediate action and fulfil its promise of creating a needs-based, sustainable Ontario Autism Program as soon as possible.

The Ford government is overhauling the current system, but implementation of the new plan was recently delayed from this spring to April 2021. Todd Smith, minister of children, community and social services, has previously said his ministry is taking the time to ensure it gets the plan right.

The resolution from Oakville Mayor Rob Bur-

ton and Councillor Cathy Duddeck says that over 24,000 children with autism are currently on waiting lists to receive treatment, "putting excessive pressure on parents and educators."

"It is not a time for parents to be patient and wait for solutions, but for the Ontario government to act swiftly to put the health and well-being of its citizens first," asserts the motion.

In addressing his regional colleagues, the head of Oakville council didn't mince his words. He said he thinks the Ford government is being "unresponsive, unaccountable and evasive" in the way it's handling the autism portfolio.

"This is not Conservatism — this is cruelty," he contended.



Oakville autism advocate Stacy Kennedy holds a photo of nine-year-old son Sam at Queen's Park. She's pushing for action on the Ontario Autism Program.

Stacy Kennedy photo

The sentiment is echoed by other parents in Halton whose children are languishing on wait lists, like Melanie Fox, a Halton Hills mother and advocate with Project Autism Milton.

Since being diagnosed with autism several years ago, Connor — Fox's 15-year-old son — has only received eight weeks of applied behavioural analysis, a therapy that's customized to improve certain be-

haviours and develop learning skills.

"It was fantastic, but it wasn't long enough," she said. "My family is in crisis. The needs-based services have to be put in place now because everybody is still in crisis."

The local mother, along with autism parents across Ontario, has received an application from the province for one-time funding designed to tide families

over until the government's new autism plan is introduced next year.

But both Kennedy and Fox say the \$5,000 being offered for children aged five to 17 is not nearly enough to make a difference. Intensive autism therapy can cost up to \$80,000 per year, advocates say.

"We don't want a cheque or cash. We want access to

See NEEDS-BASED, page 4

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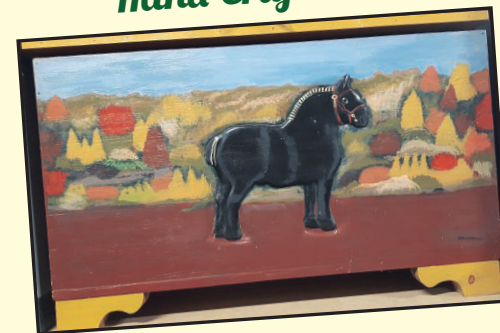
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