Parents cheer children's treatment centre

BY CHRIS TRABER
Staff Writer

A rally organized by families with special needs children to protest the lack of a children's treatment centre in York Region and Simcoe County turned into a celebration Monday.

Special needs children, parents and health care professionals erupted in jubilation when Thornhill MPP Mario Racco announced provincial support for a network of 10 children's treatment centres in what, until now, was the only part of the province without a provincially funded centre.

Reiterating a statement made earlier in Orillia by Minister of Children and Youth Services Marie Bountrogianni, Mr. Racco said the province will provide an initial $100,000 for startup costs, $3 million next year for clinical services and network infrastructure development and, by 2006-07, a budget of up to $10.5 million a year.

The centres will provide treatment services including physiotherapy, speech and language therapy, counselling and medical device fitting, in addition to education, respite and recreational supports.

Most of the 26,000 special needs children in York and Simcoe travel weekly to facilities in Toronto. The expanded local network, which will include existing service providers and facilities, will reduce that travel time, Mr. Racco said.

"What you've been waiting for is a reality this morning," he said. "Now, the important services required by special needs children and their families will be available in the community. It is our goal to provide all Ontario children with the skills and support they need to be healthy and successful."

Mr. Racco didn't know when the first cheque would arrive or where the centres would be located.

Rally co-ordinator Cindy DeCarlo, mother of a two-year-old special needs son, has pushed Ms Bountrogianni for answers on a children's rehabilitation services plan tabled in 2002.

"I am so happy to hear such encouraging news and that our children will soon be getting the services they truly deserve in our communities," she said. "It is great to see that the Liberal MPPs and the opposition have come together to benefit the children of Simcoe and York."

Oak Ridges Conservative MPP Frank Klees, a proponent of the centres, told the gathering they were witnessing a rarity.

"There aren't many days, unfortunately, when Liberals and Conservatives can agree on anything. This happens to be one of them," Mr. Klees said.

"We originally thought today was going to be yet another demonstration to get the attention of the government to provide funding. Today, we see a credible example of what can happen when people work together and the community advocates. I welcome this announcement. I thank the government for seeing the primary needs of the children and the parents."

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