

**Ministry of Children
and Youth Services**

Minister's Office

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April 5, 2017

Dear parents, families and caregivers in our autism community:

April 2, 2017 was the United Nations' World Autism Awareness Day. On March 30th I stood in Ontario's legislature to recognize its significance and I shared your efforts and the work we are doing together to improve autism supports and services for our children and youth with autism. You can read my statement at ontario.ca/autismday.

I have met with parents across the province and I will continue with this outreach. Many of you have also connected with me through letters, emails, calls and social media. I would like to thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules to share your ideas, stories, concerns and suggestions. This government recognizes and shares your unwavering commitment to your children and to our autism community.

I want to let you know we are listening and I recognize your patience and concerns. These are your children and you want the best possible supports and services for them. I hear you, and I know how important high-quality and flexible services, family-driven choices and direct funding are to you and your children.

We are building a new autism program based on advice from families, stakeholders and experts. The program is going to benefit more kids than ever before. We are transforming how we deliver autism services to children and families and we are committed to supporting families so there is minimal disruption as children and youth are transitioned to the new Ontario Autism Program (OAP). As change is implemented, we will work to support continuity in the service children and youth receive. As we begin the implementation of the new program this spring, my vision for families is clear. It involves services that are co-ordinated, family-centred and responsive to your child's or youth's needs, strengths, goals and unique potential. The changes we are implementing this June are the first step towards achieving this vision. These include:

- Enhancing access to autism services so that families will no longer need to apply to two separate programs or receive separate assessments or service plans. There will be a single point of entry for autism services in each region;
- Increasing the number of treatment spaces available so that more children and youth with autism can receive the services they need sooner; and
- Expanding services so that children of all ages can receive services that meet their unique needs.

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I have heard from families how important it is to have choice. A direct funding option will be available in the new OAP for all families who want it. A smooth transition to the new OAP for families is our priority. And, I want to assure families that come June, current direct funding will continue to be offered through the transition period until a child's spot becomes available in the new program.

In the last year, together, we have made important progress. Last spring, after listening to your thoughtful calls for service improvement, we announced an unprecedented \$500 million investment for autism services and supports creating 16,000 new spaces over five years so that more children and youth with autism can receive the services they need sooner.

We also established five diagnostic hubs to assist in increasing access to diagnostic assessments so that children can start accessing services as quickly as possible. These hubs complement pre-existing diagnostic services and will provide an additional 2,000 diagnostic assessments by March 2018.

I am pleased to inform you that wait times are decreasing across the board, as average Intensive Behavioural Intervention wait times have been reduced by 23 per cent. By the end of last year, more than 10,000 children and youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder received IBI and/or Applied Behaviour Analysis-based services and supports in Ontario, and we are working to get all children services sooner.

We are also aware that early intervention is key for young children showing early signs of autism. That is why we are investing to improve the availability of pre-diagnosis, evidence-based early intervention services in Ontario for infants and toddlers with developmental concerns who may be showing early signs of autism. We launched four early intervention play-based pilots in February 2017 and anticipate that more than 400 children will be served through these pilots over the next three years.

I want you to know that the Clinical Expert Committee has consulted with clinicians, families and other experts to inform their recommendations for how clinical decisions will be made in the new program. I also want you to know that the OAP Advisory Committee—made up of parents, service providers, educators and other experts—is also dedicated to the program design process and is meeting regularly to provide advice. I await their upcoming recommendations which will inform our path forward. We are all committed to transitioning smoothly and responsibly to the new program beginning in June, and through full implementation in 2018.

Over the next year we will continue to work together on the implementation of the new OAP. Your advice, and that of the committees, families and service providers will help us reach our overall goal of creating improved access to services, more supports for families and more treatment spaces for children and youth with autism, across all ages and needs.

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Since becoming Minister of Children and Youth Services, I have witnessed how many of you have devoted your valuable time, energy and resources to ensuring your children are supported and have a voice. As the Minister, and as a parent, I am grateful for your dedication and advocacy efforts on behalf of your children. There is nothing more important to me and to our government than supporting the needs of children in this province so that they can grow, learn and reach their full potential. For the well-being of your children, I know you want and need to be included in our progress. We are committed to transparency and will update you at every step of the way.

Ontario's investment in autism supports is unparalleled. However, this is only the beginning. We are committed to making progress together. I look forward to continuing to work with you as we begin to transition children to the new Ontario Autism Program in June. This government and my ministry are committed to working together with families. To the parents I have not had the opportunity to meet yet, I look forward to including you and your experiences in this conversation moving forward.

If you need additional information about the transition to the new Ontario Autism Program, please visit ontario.ca/autism or call 1-888-284-8340.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Michael Coteau', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Michael Coteau
Minister