

GLOBEANDMAIL.COM

[Print this Page](#)

Ontario autism program in chaos, auditor discovers



Photo: Charla Jones/The Globe and Mail

Youngshin Kim learned this week the province will provide intensive behavioural therapy for her severely autistic son Dongjoon, who is nearly 6.

By MARGARET PHILP
From Friday's Globe and Mail

UPDATED AT 2:10 AM EST

Friday, Nov 12, 2004

A special audit has uncovered an Ontario government program for autistic children in chaos, with lax oversight, millions of dollars in dubious spending and 1,200 children losing precious time on a waiting list while money goes unspent.

A damning report to be tabled next week by Jim McCarter, Ontario's acting provincial auditor, has uncovered money hemorrhaging from the \$44-million Intensive Early Intervention program without notice of the Ministry of Children and Youth Services.

He found the ministry's records rife with inaccurate and erroneous information, including at least two instances where a combined \$3-million was recorded as spent when not a penny of it was.

While the clock is ticking for 1,200 children languishing on a waiting list for funding that vanishes once they turn 6 — that number is more than double the 547 children currently being served — the auditor found that the program has spent a total of \$16.7-million less than its budget allowed over the five years since it began.

At the same time, children who are being served under the program are being shortchanged, on average, more than four hours a week of therapy for which they have been funded. Under the program, children receive an average of \$79,000 a year to cover the steep cost of intensive one-on-one therapy, regarded as the most effective treatment

Advertisement

for training autistic children to function more normally.

"If I was a parent whose child turned 6 and never got a day of service, I would be so angry and so upset and so frustrated," said New Democrat MPP Shelley Martel, a member of the standing committee on public accounts that requested the special audit last spring.

"Think of how many more kids could have gotten services with \$16.7-million if the government had been properly monitoring and running and overseeing this program."

Dongjoon Kim might have been one of them. Nearly 6, the severely autistic boy sat on the waiting list for two years before his mother, Youngshin Kim, got word this week that he had been approved for 30 hours a week of intensive behavioural therapy.

In the two years while they waited, the family sold their Toronto house to raise the money to pay for Dongjoon's therapy. His father, who was studying forestry at the University of Toronto, quit his studies to earn an income to support the \$80,000 they paid to various private therapists. Even so, they ran out of money last June and had to cut Dongjoon's therapy from 30 hours to eight a week.

"It was painful to see him idling around at home," Mrs. Kim said. "My husband and I are both working, but it's definitely not enough. We only pay our bills for rent and living costs."

It has been a huge sacrifice for the family, but the 18 months of therapy have transformed Dongjoon from a withdrawn child who at age 4 would tap objects incessantly and dangle strings and babble, to a child who can play with a ball, can say, "I want water," and can make lines on a page with a pencil.

"This is really huge," Mrs. Kim said of the funding. "I still can't believe it."

But even when children like Dongjoon are finally plucked from the waiting list, the auditor found, most were receiving far fewer hours of therapy than they had been approved for and than research suggests as the minimum for intensive therapy to be effective. While autistic children were granted funding for an average of 23 hours a week of therapy, at one agency they received no more than 13.

Therapists on staff with the agencies would quit abruptly or call in sick, but funding would still flow even if no substitute was found. "Significant costs are being incurred for services not delivered," the auditor writes.

While the total budget climbed from \$4-million to \$44-million over the past five years, the number of children receiving funding has barely budged. In some cases, money was spent on new computers and furniture without the ministry's knowledge.

The auditor found that handing money directly to parents to hire therapists was far cheaper than paying the nine government-approved agencies scattered around the province that are providing services to the vast majority of families under the program.

At the three agencies it audited — the ministry was unable to provide accurate information for all nine — the cost of putting money straight into the hands of parents was as little as one-sixth the cost of funding the agencies to provide the service. It cost one agency \$126 an hour to provide treatment, while parents living in the same part of the province managed to hire private therapists for an average of \$20 an hour.

"The ministry does not yet have adequate oversight procedures in place to ensure that external service providers are spending funds provided to assist autistic children and their parents in the most cost-effective manner," the auditor concludes.

Andrew Weir, a spokesman for Children's Services Minister Marie Bountrogianni, said the ministry concurs with the auditor's finding, but

that times are changing. It has doubled the budget for autism services to \$80-million — as it was going to under the Tories — and started to hire more therapists for preschool-age children with autism and consultants to advise teachers with autistic children in the classroom.

"A lot of what the auditor is talking about is consistent with what we've been doing and the changes we've made in the program," he said.

The audit is another blow to the Ontario government, which has been hauled into the courts and before a human-rights tribunal in the past two years over its policies for funding services for autistic children.

Twenty-nine families who joined forces against the province in a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of cutting off funding for intensive behavioural therapy when a child reaches 6 are awaiting the court's ruling. Although the suit was launched under the Conservatives, the McGuinty government continues to defend it. A human-rights tribunal hearing began a few weeks ago in the cases of more than 100 other families insisting that the age-6 threshold for funding and the long waiting lists discriminate against their children.

Ontario is not the only province called to account for its autism services. The Supreme Court of Canada is deliberating in the British Columbia government's appeal of a ruling that awarded the parents of two dozen autistic children funding to cover the cost of a therapy that the province deemed ineffective.



© 2004 Bell Globemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.