

Some families still waiting for COVID-19 government funding

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By Michael RileyLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter

The government of Ontario has initiated enhanced and expanded funding changes to the Special Services at Home program for Ontario parents caring for a child with a developmental and/or physical disability, the Passport program with adults with a developmental disability, and the Ontario Autism Childhood program. These changes aim to protect the province's most vulnerable, and the people who care for them on a daily basis, and to provide respite as they cannot have outside people come in to care for their children during the pandemic. While families already approved for this funding have gotten it already, those on the list for new funding are still waiting. Ashley Harnden is the director of communications with the office of the Hon. Todd Smith, Minister of Children, Community and Social Services. She says the reaction to the changes in funding have been overwhelmingly positive. Our additional investment of \$20.4 million in the Special Services at Home Program will ensure 4,700 more families will get the help and support they need to access respite and programming for their child. This investment will ensure more children can build the skills and abilities that will help them communicate and become more independent. Additionally, our government is committed to supporting adults and children with developmental disabilities and their families during the COVID-19 outbreak. Two weeks ago, we announced the expansion of temporary eligible expenses for the Special Services at Home program which serves children with developmental and physical disabilities as well as to the Passport program which serves adults with developmental disabilities. The expanded expenses now accommodate activities, services and supports that can be pursued by individuals and their families while at home. These changes are in recognition of the challenges that recipients and families are facing to support their family member at home, while community-based activities and settings are closed due to Public Health recommendations. These temporary changes are effective immediately and will remain in place until further notice is provided by the ministry, she says. NDP MPP Monique Taylor says that while announcement of new and expanded funding are great, she has yet to see any money flow to families. She is an MPP for Hamilton Mountain, the deputy opposition whip and the official opposition critic for Children and Youth Services. Everything is backlogged in the ministry and that is so unfair. Families are concerned about what the new list actually contains and they're not getting straight answers from their local providers. For Special Services at Home some families who put down money in March they still haven't been reimbursed. I know one family that paid \$1,400 out of pocket and they still haven't seen any money. These are families that are facing great challenges on top of COVID-19 and they're the ones being left behind. They're being told we're really busy and that we're behind, well that isn't good enough, she says. MPP Taylor says that not one family she knows of has received money yet, and she's been quite active on this issue through social media, and talking with the families involved. She also said the new year for the programs started April 1, and that to her knowledge, no money has been sent out, including reimbursements from March. The government has done nothing yet to support these families through this [pandemic]. We have families that were isolated and not getting support, and now we're putting them in further isolation. We have families who are still waiting for their invitation letter to be accepted into the childhood budget. They still haven't received a word, and they're being told we're really behind. Parents are just frustrated they're not getting the money, that's the story. It's great that the government's making these announcements but the money hasn't flowed. We're now into May and these parents are still waiting, she says. Ashley Herndon acknowledges there have been delays, but the Ministry is working to get the money out to the families that need it. With regard to the SSAH investment, the ministry's regional offices will contact these new eligible families in the coming weeks. The ministry has begun to send out allocation letters to current recipients. Current SSAH and Passport recipients who submitted claims for the 2019/2020 fiscal year and continue to be eligible for funding this year will also receive a three month pro-rated amount of their annual authorized allocation in advance, by the end of May 2020. Families with questions about SSAH may contact the nearest ministry regional office for support, while Passport inquiries should be directed to the local Passport agency, she says. The Special Services at Home program is funded and managed by the Ministry of Community and Social Services, and helps parents of mentally or physically disabled children get the care needed for their kids and the respite they require. The Passport program is a program that helps adults 18 years or older with a developmental disability to participate in their communities. It also enables their caregivers to get a respite from their responsibilities. The Ontario Autism program helps parents with children who have autism get the care and support they need until their child turns 18 years of age. It also provides respite funding to parents. The ability for families to spend the funding from these programs more broadly has been requested for years, and

is a welcome change, even if it may be only temporary. The government will also be giving out 25 per cent of the funding in advance, to help families get the assistance they need while they are forced to stay home during COVID-19. Some of the goods and services that apply to these changes are sensory items (multi-sensory related products and technologies), technology (laptops, online learning, videogames, webcams, media service subscriptions, e-readers, remote monitoring or medical alert devices), supplies for home-based hobbies and activities (arts and crafts, puzzles, books), home-based physical activity supplies (skipping rope, trampoline, frisbee), personal protective equipment and supplies, essential service delivery fees (grocery, pharmacy) and behavioral support plans and related interventions, to reduce challenging behaviours or potential crisis situations to help families care for a loved one during this pandemic. Reaction to the funding announcements has been positive from those working in the industry. Marg Cox is the executive director of Point in Time Centre for Children, Youth and Parents, and says that given the limitations that currently exist for families regarding respite, the increased flexibility of these changes is a positive step. Agencies in all sectors that serve children, youth and families are quickly adapting and moving to virtual service models in an attempt to continue supporting clients effectively. We understand from the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services that virtual respite will be covered through SSAH funding as part of the expanded criteria. Community agencies have been meeting to discuss how to build capacity around virtual respite provision including; expanding the resource base, exploring connectivity and accessibility needs and researching best practices, she says. Jennifer Churchill is the chief executive officer at Empowered Kids Ontario, and her organization has created a virtual care guide to help other organizations integrate virtual care into their programs. She agrees with Cox that the announcement of the funding changes is amazing. I have to commend the government. They really tried to listen to families and be flexible. I've heard some terrific stories of kids being so pleased that their speech therapist is on the other side of the computer and feeling connected in that way. The reaction has been quite positive. Families are quite pleased and feeling supported by the outreach, although I have to say that I don't know if the program has been expanded yet. This announcement came at the end of March as pandemic activity was ramping up so I don't know if they have flowed any of the funding to additional families, she says. Sherri Taylor is a mother of two kids with diverse needs, one with autism, the other with cerebral palsy. Both of her kids qualify and receive funding for the Special Services at Home program. She is also an advocate for children with diverse needs and is the president of More than Play, which offers services to kids with diverse abilities. Taylor says that her family and families already approved for SSAH have gotten their funding. To her knowledge, and echoing MPP Taylor's criticisms, families not yet approved for SSAH are still waiting for their letters of approval with no end in sight. We're not sure why it's taking so long and it's been at least a month. I know everything has slowed down but they still need to get this going for these 4,700 plus families. Where this government has really gone wrong is with their communication. Please focus your attention on the list and get families on it. Our families are struggling, especially now with people losing their jobs. A lot of our kids they depend and thrive on structure and so to be out of school and away from friends, teachers, educational assistants and support workers, it's very difficult for them. These families are drowning, she says. She talks about SSAH and how it has helped her family in previous years and this year, since they were already approved and have gotten their money. It's a program set up to provide respite, so it could be someone coming into your home, doing laundry, having a housekeeper come in. We usually use it for housekeeping and having a respite worker come in to hang out with our boys, spend time with them, take them places, so my husband and I can get a break. That's what hurt us when COVID-19 hit, was not having someone to come in to help with our kids. So, not having that help, someone to take care of the house or help with the boys, has been horrible. We miss our respite workers so much, she says. When COVID-19 first hit, Taylor and another advocate, Matthew Dever, contacted the Minister Todd Smith's office to see if there was any way to help families out there with kids with diverse needs, to look at respite in a different way. She and Dever had participated in an autism advisory panel which led to the creation of the new Ontario Autism program, so they had contacts within the ministry. They also asked a lot of families what they would require for respite during COVID-19 and got back a multitude of answers, everything from Lego to laptops to trampolines. Those families in turn wrote letters to the Ministry and their MPs. In the end, she says there were enough calls to spur the changes, and thankfully they listened to the calls. I'm assuming summer day camps will be closed due to COVID-19, and our families really rely on these camps for respite. It also keeps our kids on a schedule, keeps them busy, growing and flourishing. It also gives them a lot of social time. So this summer will be really different for our families, so having something like a trampoline or pool, where the kids can be busy on that and you can sit down with a cup of coffee for five minutes and take a little break, for many of our families that will be crucial, she says. Taylor also hopes that the funding changes remain in place for quite some time, as her kids and many of the kids in the program have compromised immune systems and their parents would be loath to send them out to a day camp if the virus wasn't completely under control, due to the increased health risks their kids would face. She and the other families were pleased to see the expanded list, and feel the government went above and beyond. They took into account our mentally complex kids whose families do not have the ability to go and grocery shop as it's too big a risk. So, to be able to pay for a

grocery delivery service, the list went above and beyond what we'd advocated for. There was a big sigh of relief from those families that wouldn't have been able to afford those extras otherwise. I know in my family that paper, printing supplies, paint and glue, have been used more than I can count. We're fortunate that my husband is still working, but a lot of families aren't that lucky now. This funding is meant to give a lot of relief to those families during this time,? she says.