

Families find the province's secrecy troubling

AUTISM from A1

In a letter to Coteau's predecessor, Tracy MacCharles, three weeks after the age cap was announced, the expert committee cautioned the move would be detrimental to vulnerable children.

The three-page letter, dated April 18, was obtained by the Star under freedom of information legislation, along with other email correspondence between the committee and the ministry in the two-month period following the announcement.

When contacted by the Star last week, some committee members declined to comment, citing the confidentiality agreements. Others referred questions to panel chair Susan Honeyman and vice-chair Dr. Wendy Roberts, who also refused requests, saying they were bound by the agreements.

The Ontario Autism Coalition says secrecy imposed by such agreements is "troubling," especially for families plagued by uncertainty and wary of government promises.

Last spring, McIntosh was at the forefront of grassroots protests against the age cut-off. He played a role in the ministry's decision to amend its plans last June, when Coteau took over the children's services portfolio in a cabinet shuffle and announced that there would be funding for kids taken off wait-lists to cover the costs of a year's treatment. Coteau also accelerated the program rollout, vowing services would be in place by 2017.

The new advisory panel McIntosh sits on is one of the few formal avenues for families to have their voices heard. The coalition also includes people on the autism spectrum and professionals in the field. It relies on regular input from a group of 50 young adults with the condition and has also been pushing for people with autism to be included in government advisory roles.

But to join the panel, members had to sign confidentiality agreements that prohibit them from "directly or indirectly" engaging in public commentary on the panel's undertakings without "explicit written consent" from the ministry. The agreements also stipulate that "any requests for public comment should be deferred to the ministry."

McIntosh says he signed in June despite his own reservations and objections from other parents, who worried "it was going to be a muzzle and limit" their effectiveness.

After the Star story last week, he and coalition colleagues had a change of heart, fearing the restrictions would rob them of the ability to speak up on key issues and ensure that their opinions are accurately interpreted and portrayed to the public.

"Our nervousness has now turned to very justified worry and anger," the coalition wrote in its letter to Coteau.



ANDREW FRANCIS WALLACE/TORONTO STAR

Ontario Autism Coalition president Bruce McIntosh is concerned about confidentiality agreements given to Ontario's autism advisory panel members.



Children's services minister Michael Coteau announced new funding for autism programs last June.

Those concerns are legitimate, says Amir Attaran, a professor in the faculties of law and medicine at the University of Ottawa.

"Good for them," he said, after hearing about the coalition's stance on what he calls "overzealous" restraints imposed by confidentiality agreements.

Attaran, who has been "uninvited" from panels after crossing out selected phrases in such agreements before signing, calls it "grotesquely inappropriate" for governments to try to prevent panel members from publicly sharing their personal views.

Dissent is an important part of decision-making and should be an open part of the process, he says.

While restricting members from sharing proprietary information or input from others is appropriate, "deliberations and opinions belong to the people doing the deliberating and (expressing of) opinions," he said. "How dare the ministry suppress that?"

In an emailed statement, the children's ministry said confidentiality agreements are common for advisory panels, "so that individual members feel they can provide open and honest input as part of their work."

"The ministry does not stand in the way of CEC (clinical expert committee) members speaking to the media," it said.

However, multiple emails sent to committee members from ministry staff last spring before and after the autism program was announced — and obtained in the freedom of information request — stress that questions from the media should be redirected to the ministry.

The ministry says the expert committee was one of many groups that helped shape its new autism plan. The experts' mandate is to advise the government on evidence-based research and clinical practice, though it doesn't play a direct role in policy or

funding decisions.

In announcing the autism program last March, the Liberals cited the panel and a report it completed in 2013 that mapped out what a complete continuum of services could look like for children from infancy through the school years. That report was simultaneously released on the ministry website.

In the ensuing weeks of criticism and rallies at Queen's Park, the Liberals continued to defend the plan and reference its expert panel, even after the group's April 18 letter stated the new program was "not in keeping with the (2013) report recommendations as a whole."

The letter from the eight panel members also said:

> The autism program was "initiated prematurely, without sufficient consultation" and should have been developed and tested first.

> While IBI is most effective for children ages 2 to 5, there is no evidence it is ineffective for children older than 5.

> Redirecting IBI to younger ages should only happen once ample services are in place for kids over 5, including robust school supports and an enhanced and scientifically evaluated applied behaviour analysis (ABA) program. But the plan as outlined falls short of meeting the needs

of those children.

Because panel members will not comment, their views on changes announced by Coteau in June are unclear. Many parents, however, worry the new program will not meet their children's needs.

On May 17, Deputy Premier Deb Matthews was among cabinet ministers continuing to defend the program in the legislature. Responding to an opposition question, she read aloud an endorsement from a March 29 ministry press release attributed to Dr. Wendy Roberts, a developmental pediatrician, autism researcher at Sick Kids and clinical expert committee member.

In an email Roberts sent to two ministry officials the following day, she wrote, "I am very concerned about the ongoing reaction to the reference to my name in the house and misrepresentation of my perspective as I learned the details of the (autism program) rollout."

Two days later, Roberts asked in another email, "is there a lag in having my endorsement and my name in news releases being removed from the MCYS (ministry) website?"

Roberts did not respond to the Star's requests for comment on the emails.

Her endorsement no longer appears on the ministry's website.

Domestic violence victims to get crucial help

Initiative will help families move into market-rent homes

PETER GOFFIN
STAFF REPORTER

New government funding devoted to a housing benefit may help hundreds of survivors of domestic violence find safe, permanent homes more quickly, and free up space in shelters for women trying to escape an abusive partner, experts say.

"Safe and stable housing is really a basic need for everyone and especially for these abused women and children," said Arlene McCalla, an executive director at Interval House women's shelter in Toronto. "It's hard for them to get anything else in their lives done when they don't have a stable place to live."

Toronto is among 22 Ontario communities that will receive \$20 million over the next two years to pilot the new benefit. It will be funded by the provincial and federal governments and run by the individual communities.

The initiative is aimed at helping up to 1,000 domestic violence survivors a year move directly into market-rent apartments instead of spending months in shelters waiting for social housing.

Changes to landlord and tenant legislation that took effect earlier this month will allow victims of physical or sexual abuse to break a current lease on 28 days' notice without financial penalty.

Queen's Park originally earmarked \$2.4 million in last spring's budget for a pilot project to help up to 500 women. But the government is boosting that spending to \$13.7 million as part of the Liberals' action plan to stop sexual violence and harassment, a priority area for the government, said Housing Minister Chris Ballard.

The federal government will contribute \$6.3 million from its social infrastructure fund.

"Our premier and this government (have) been taking a strong stance against sexual violence and harassment," Ballard said in an interview. "Moving it from \$2.4 million to \$20 million was something (we felt) needed to be done. All Ontarians, no matter where they live, deserve to be safe and free from harm."

Ballard said the province was inspired by a 2010 Interval House pilot project and similar work by other organizations helping victims of domestic violence.

Women who took part in the city-funded Interval House project received \$350 per month for two years. Recipients were also enrolled in Interval House job training, life-skills workshops and other programs to help them continue to live independently after the pilot project ended.

McCalla said about one-quarter of the participants were able to stay in market-rate housing at the end of the program.

In Toronto, domestic violence survivors are put on a special priority list



CARLOS OSORIO/TORONTO STAR

The long wait list for social housing puts women at risk because it keeps emergency shelters for victims of domestic violence filled, says Arlene McCalla, executive co-director of Interval House.

for social housing. There are currently 1,500 households on that list and their average wait for housing is 10 months, according to city reports.

"That put(s) women who are in the community in danger, because they're unable to get space in the shelter, because it's full of women who can't leave because they don't have a place to live," McCalla said.

Under the new provincial scheme, Toronto will receive more than \$3.9 million to help domestic violence survivors. The city has proposed distributing \$500 a month, plus some startup housing costs, to 355 households. Under provincial guidelines,

the money can go directly to the women or to their landlords, depending on the living arrangements.

The pilot project is welcome news for one woman who fled from a violent spouse and spent nearly five months in a north Toronto shelter before getting a space in rent-geared-to-income housing.

"(Housing) is just one big question mark that could easily be taken care of and then have women safe while they tackle other things," she said.

The woman, who asked not to be named because she is still worried her spouse may locate her, said her wait for housing was relatively short

because she did not have a family with her and was willing to live anywhere. Not everyone is so lucky.

"The amount of (waiting) time increases with the number of children, accessibility barriers, other things that come into play," she told the Star.

Over the next two years, the province will monitor the 22 pilots to see if any of the approaches could work in other communities.

"We are not looking necessarily at one-size-fits-all," Ballard said. "We've heard about the need for flexibility in these sorts of programs."

With files from Laurie Monsebraaten

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