

March 26, 2009

Autism Ontario's Response to the 2009 Ontario Budget*

The current world economic decline has serious implications for Canadians living in Ontario. This is not a news flash for anyone, but it provides the context in which today's Ontario budget was released. Without spending more time on the daily media barrage of "bad economic news", it will be enough to say that times are very uncertain, but specific choices are being made by the Ontario government to bring in new tax measures while providing some relief to families who face serious hardship.

The Ontario Child Benefit – Ontario is accelerating the phase-in of the OCB by two years, providing low-and moderate income families with up to \$1,100 per child annually, starting in July 2009, with more families eligible. (page 2, Backgrounder). The emphasis here is clearly on families experiencing hardship. This is vitally important and Autism Ontario is grateful to see this in the 2009 budget.

Government Focus on Taxes: "Reform of Ontario's tax system for growth and prosperity". There will be tax relief to corporate income tax rate, personal income tax , but the big news is the single sales tax – 13% - which is a harmonization of the existing 5% GST and 8% PST. This will start on July 1, 2010, pending legislative approval.

Exemptions and questions: Items that are exempt from the provincial portion of the single sales tax include books, diapers, children's clothing and footwear, children's car seats and car booster seats and feminine hygiene products. The question that remains for families of children with autism is whether private or DFO ABA services will be exempt from the additional 8% included in the newly formed HST. It is our hope that as we get closer to 2010, that it will become apparent that such an increase would represent an unacceptable added hardship for families already under financial duress in getting evidence-based treatment for their children, and that these treatments would be added to the list of exemptions already identified above. An official federal/provincial statement that clarifies exemptions regarding taxes for ASD treatment would be helpful.

Three Payments: To help with the transition to this new system, (page 4, News Release) eligible families with an income of \$160,000 or less would get three payments totaling \$1,000 to help them adjust to the new single sales tax. Eligible single people with an income of \$80,000 or less would get three payments totaling \$300; the first benefit payment would arrive in June 2010, the second in December 2010 and the third in June 2011. This should occur automatically based on ones 2009 tax return.

Sales tax credits: The government is also proposing sales tax credits, providing low- and middle-income Ontarians with a permanent refundable credit of up to \$260 for each adult and child, which will be payable quarterly starting July 2010 for low-income families (\$25,000 or less).

Real Estate: In addition, newly constructed homes under \$400,000 wouldn't be subject to the tax and a proportional rebate would be available for other new homes valued between \$400,000 and \$500,000.

Autism? As was the case with last year's budget, the word autism does not appear anywhere in the 2009 budget; but atypically, little is generally noted about education and children's services either. Given the recent investments in ABA and transition supports for students with ASD in Ontario schools, we are anticipating that funding for these initiatives will remain on track. Regarding the Provincial Autism Intervention Program (IBI), we are hopeful that the support provided to the Regional Autism Programs this year will carry through to this budget year so that additional pressures faced by this program will not place existing programs in jeopardy. Anything less would be a step backward when waiting lists remain at unacceptably high levels.

Other items which may impact individuals with ASD and their families:

- **Social Housing:** (Budget, page 37): New housing infrastructure to support the Poverty Reduction Strategy- more than \$360 million (some from federal government, some from Ontario) to help create new affordable housing for low-income seniors and persons with disabilities. Other notes regarding housing speak to building structure rehabilitation and energy retrofits as well as funds for the Canada-Ontario Affordable Housing Program which supports many groups, but also those with mental illness.

Housing is an area Autism Ontario identified in its "Forgotten" public policy paper on the needs of adults with ASD, but it is not clear how these announced housing supports may be accessed by people with ASD.

- Although **ODSP** is not increasing, the basic allowance and maximum shelter allowance is being increased by 2% for ODSP recipients. Included in this 2% are families receiving Temporary Care Assistance and Assistance for Children with Severe Disabilities, as well as those living in long-term care homes who receive comfort allowance (page 37).
- Increases to the minimum wage remains on track - going up in 2009 to \$9.50 and projected to \$10.25 on March 31, 2010.

Noteworthy - No Claw Backs: One of the key items that we, along with many other charitable organizations, spoke about at the pre-budget consultations on November 21, 2008 was the importance of not instituting claw-backs to ODSP for individuals with disabilities in Ontario who would make application for the RDSP. We are grateful that this request was heard and that the claw-backs were not implemented. This positive decision has already allowed many families who have young or adult children with disabilities to sign up for an RDSP in communities across Ontario.

Autism Ontario: Our hope for the 2009-2010 budget year is that we will be able to maintain the key supports we receive through MCYS for 1-1 Worker Reimbursement to parents for summer programs, ABACUS and the Realize Community Potential Program.

Additional Comments:

Economic downturn does not mean that the needs of people with ASD are somehow decreased or eclipsed by financial challenges. In reality, it is likely that there will be increased hardship for families already struggling personally and financially to obtain the health, treatment, educational and living needs across the lifespan for their children with ASD. Prevalence rates of 1 in 150 children affected by ASD are continually becoming more evident in the demands on our health, children's, education and adult service systems. Autism Ontario will continue to actively contribute to public policy discussions to encourage fairness and effectiveness in resource allocation in times of fiscal restraint.

** Note: The full text of Ontario's 2009 Budget can be viewed at this link:*
http://www.fin.gov.on.ca/english/budget/ontariobudgets/2009/papers_all.html

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