



Autism Treatment Services of Canada
Association Canadienne pour L'Obtention
de Services aux Personnes Autistiques



Collective Voice of the Autism Community in Canada Calls on Government to Take Steps to Establish National Autism Strategy

For immediate release

OTTAWA, ONTARIO--(Marketwire - Nov. 5, 2007)

The Conservative Government has provided its response to the Standing Senate Committee recommendations on Autism in its **Response to the Report of the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, Pay Now or Pay Later: Autism Families in Crisis, tabled on October 17th, 2007.**

Good news in the federal response is the announcement of a new Autism Research Chair at Simon Fraser University focusing on the study of treatments and interventions. Autism organizations are encouraged to see more focus on applied research and best practices. In addition the government has promised further funding for ASD research in general, has committed to hosting a fall research symposium and is promising more investigation into the potential for developing national surveillance on ASD.

The response states that “...*the Government of Canada acknowledges the complexity of the challenges related to ASD and agrees with the Committee that there is much work to be done to enhance collaboration and evidence on this issue...*” Autism advocates across Canada had hoped that the federal government would take a stronger position in response to the report, which provides unmistakably clear direction. A number of key organizations are coming together to urge our federal government to take a clear leadership role in confronting what truly is a national problem.

Last December, the Standing Senate Committee investigating Funding for the Treatment of Autism heard from hundreds of families, adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), experts in treatment and service delivery, researchers and Autism advocacy organizations across Canada – representing the over 200,000 children, youth and adults affected by ASD in this country. These figures, which are sobering enough, do not represent the true number of Canadians affected by the lack of adequate action and services for ASD. Parents, other family members and caregivers are also deeply affected, emotionally, socially and financially.

In its ground breaking report entitled, *PAY NOW OR PAY LATER: Autism Families in Crisis (March 2007)* the bi-partisan Senate Committee recommended some urgent initiatives that the federal government could implement over the next two years in response to the crisis situation faced by many individuals with ASD and their families.

Most importantly, both Conservative and Liberal members of this Senate Committee called on our government to develop a comprehensive National Autism Strategy to address the complex needs and glaring inequalities in public funding and access to targeted services and treatment across the country.

ASD typically presents lifelong challenges to those individuals diagnosed as well as to their family members and to society as a whole – a comprehensive national plan is vital.

The government declined to take up the Senate’s recommendation to lead the way forward in committing to a National ASD Strategy. In spite of receiving hundreds of hours of testimony from all concerned; well-vetted and honed down by a dedicated committee of Senators, it seems that: “... *governments do not yet know enough about ASD and its treatments to implement effective and well-informed strategies that would lead to meaningful outcomes...*”. The 12-page response is very focused on knowledge gaps and provides a great deal of information about current special needs programming – little of which is Autism-specific.

Our government's Senate Committee also supported fully the recommendation of a federal/provincial/territorial ministerial conference to look at innovative funding arrangements for the purpose of financing Autism therapies, defining essential services and looking at new family support measures but the government has also declined to take up this recommendation. With the exception of First Nations and Inuit communities, the response is in keeping with federal practice and places all responsibility for health and educational funding decisions on transfer payments and service delivery squarely on the provinces and territories. This is in striking contrast to the U.S. policy dealing with the same funding crisis: the United States' Combating Autism Act of 2006 authorized the federal government to spend \$US 945 million over five years for Autism research, screening, intervention and education. Last week the joint U.S. House and Senate conference committee approved \$37 million for this year's spending on autism services and treatment programs alone.

While progress has been made, it is clear that Autism Spectrum Disorders have not yet found their rightful place in the health, education and social service sectors at any level of our governments. Working in the Autism field, we hear daily the stories of the mental and financial hardship that parents, family members and many adults with ASD experience. We are deeply concerned about the shortage of services; we recognize from first-hand, on-the-ground experience, the urgent need for qualified professionals to work with individuals with ASD.

Immediate action is needed to address these glaring gaps.

Now that this response has clearly acknowledged the seriousness of the pressures facing families and individuals with Autism - we hope the next step will be for our federal government, in cooperation with all of the provinces and territories, to take a leadership role with respect to Autism. Our growing stakeholder Alliance of ASD advocates and professionals working in the field provides an excellent and willing collaborative resource to assist this government in taking up the Senate's call to develop a comprehensive National ASD Strategy to address the lifespan issues of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders. If our government is seeking input in developing such a strategy, the expertise is certainly available.

We call on the Canadian government to embrace the recommendations of its Senate and to show the leadership we so badly need to address this crisis as other countries have done. We all feel strongly that a National Autism Strategy must be formulated very soon and that developing this strategy should be vigorously pursued.

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