



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

For immediate release

November 7, 2006 Ottawa – More than two years have passed since Autism Society Canada (ASC) began our call to the federal government to put in place a comprehensive national autism strategy. Private members' bills in the House of Commons concerning autism and a study of funding for the treatment of autism in the Senate are welcome activities to draw attention to the multifaceted needs of our community. They do not replace the need for the federal government to begin to take action to establish a national autism strategy to address the lifespan issues of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD).

The autism community is diverse and composed of many stakeholders – children with ASD, youth and adults with ASD, parents and other family members, health care professionals, educators, researchers and public policy makers. “Like many diverse communities addressing pressing and complex issues, we do not always have all the answers, nor do we always agree. Nonetheless, we all acknowledge that autism has not yet found its rightful place in the health, education and social services systems of our governments, and that more progress is required to raise public awareness and understanding of autism and respect for difference,” said ASC president Jo-Lynn Fenton. She continued: “This past October, as part of Canadian Autism Awareness Month, ASC heard from members of our community from across Canada. There is a pressing need for appropriate treatment, supports and accommodations for individuals with ASD throughout their life. We need action.”

Autism Society Canada continues to collaborate with many stakeholders to identify the key components of a national autism strategy. We call on government to:

Make Autism a National Priority: Health Canada can make autism a national priority by initiating surveillance and reporting and by setting national guidelines for treatment and service delivery. An all-party parliamentary committee on autism and a national autism symposium to bring together key stakeholders would be first steps in this process.

Improve Screening and Diagnosis: Universal autism screening should be made available in Canada. Accurate timely diagnosis and comprehensive assessment of all aspects of ASD are essential. These must be provided by professionals with specialized ASD diagnostic training for both children and adults.

Improve Access to Treatment: Universally accessible scientifically validated treatment regardless of age or ability to pay is essential. The federal government must work with its provincial and territorial counterparts, and increase funding to provide critical (no-cost) effective evidence-based treatment such as Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA) for as long as it is deemed necessary by an individual's medical team. Treatment to address educational/learning needs, behaviour issues, communication problems and/or motor and physical disabilities is also vital. These may include behavioural intervention, social and self-help skills, speech and language therapy, physical or occupational therapy, specialized medical services and pharmacological assistance.

Improve Services and Supports: Targeted education services, professional training and social and health supports are needed for all Canadians with ASD across the lifespan. These include:

- supports to facilitate community inclusion such as teachers and aides with specialized autism education training; life skills programs; mental health services provided by professionals trained in ASD issues; career and vocational training; and assisted living support;
- supports for caregivers, including respite, family training and assistance, sibling supports, social services and long-term planning assistance;
- improved financial and vocational supports to individuals with disabilities and their families through the federal tax and labour systems.

Foster Research: Significant funding must be targeted for ASD research to Canadian funding organizations such as CIHR. Research that provides individuals with ASD and their families with the practical support they need is key.

As a member of the Canadian Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health (CAMIMH), ASC also supports the establishment of a Canadian Mental Health Commission and the creation of a Mental Health Transition Fund. Some of the needs of our community can begin to be addressed at the national level if these and other recommendations from the final report of The Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology entitled: *Out of the Shadows at Last, Transforming Mental Health, Mental Illness and Addiction Services in Canada* are implemented.

ASC is a federation of Canada-wide provincial and territorial autism societies whose collective memberships represent the largest body of individuals affected by ASD and their families in Canada.

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