

Easter Seals Ontario Response to the Special Needs Strategy for Children and Youth

Background:

On Friday April 4, 2014, an announcement was made from the provincial government regarding a new Special Needs Strategy, built upon the government's 2013 \$10 million investment to improve the service experience and outcomes for children and youth with special needs. To view the announcement, please visit

<http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/topics/specialneeds/strategy/index.aspx>.

The announcement noted:

"The goal is to connect these children and youth to the services they need as early as possible and improve the service experience of families in three key areas:

1. **Identifying kids earlier and getting them the right help sooner**

Trained providers will have a new developmental screen for children in the preschool years. They will screen for potential risks to the child's development as early as possible.

2. **Coordinating service planning**

New service planning coordinators for children and youth with multiple or complex special needs will connect families to the right services and supports.

3. **Making supports and service delivery seamless**

Integrating the delivery of rehabilitation services, such as speech-language therapy, occupational therapy and physiotherapy. Services will be easier to access and seamless from birth through the school years."

Developmental Screening

Easter Seals Ontario supports the goal of early identification and connection to intervention services. The strategies for this goal include new developmental screening tools, and staff trained to use the tools with families in various settings including the doctor's office and Early Years Centres.

Easter Seals Ontario believes:

- Early identification and intervention are critical in meeting the needs of children with physical disabilities and their families
- All families should be supported to complete the developmental screen at different ages and stages
- Training of staff to share the developmental screening tools with families should include strategies on helping families who face language, cultural and other barriers to understand the screening tool and access services

- Training of staff should include emotional support of families who may be upset or concerned about what the screening results mean for their child

Coordinated Service Planning

For implementation of the strategy, the province will be divided into 34 regions. Toronto is a region on its own. The boundaries are based on county or region divisions, and in many cases, will divide school boards. For example, in Thames Valley there are two regions: London Middlesex and Oxford-Elgin.

Planning committees established in each of the 34 regions will be responsible for developing a seamless system for the delivery of rehabilitation services. The regional planning committees will have until March, 2015 to develop a plan to deliver children's services, including speech and language and other rehabilitation services. The plan is not limited by current policies or funding. There is no new funding for services, and the plan is expected to generate efficiencies to enhance services.

Families today are very mobile and often move between different parts of the province. It is therefore critical that there be consistency between children's services across the province. Individual service plans should be portable and families should expect to get the same level of services wherever they move. Families should also be able to access children's services easily wherever they are in the province.

Easter Seals Ontario believes:

- There should be a single lead at the provincial level to ensure that there is consistency of service availability and levels across the province
- Community planning should include parent representatives from the community, from local parent groups and from Special Education Advisory Committees
- Planning should recognize and include local, regional and provincial resources and services
- Planning should identify common language and definitions for the new service system
- Planning should build on the strength and expertise of existing service providers
- Transition protocols, and communication guidelines, should be in place to ensure portability of individual service plans and ease of access to services for families moving within the province

Integrated Children's Services

The services listed in the Coordinated Services Planning Guide exclude some important sectors, among them, financial support. Funding provided to families through Assistance for Children with Severe Disabilities, Special Services at Home and Specialized Respite Services is critical to the family's capacity to support their child. The children's service system should include clear linkages to ensure that families have access to all the services for which they may be eligible.

Recreation and social activities are important to the development of children and these services need to be accessible to children with complex needs. This may include

financial support, specialized equipment or staff. Creating social opportunities for these children is important and should be considered as part of the individual plan.

Easter Seals Ontario believes:

- Service system should include financial support for children and their families to cover the additional costs faced by families
- Service system should include social and recreational activities as integral components of the children's service system
- Services should be delivered as close to the location of the child's daily activities as possible, including at home, in child care centres and schools and within the local community
- Service system should focus on early identification and intervention, and be responsive to a child's changing needs over time
- A range of evidence-based services should be available to meet the individual needs of children and youth
- Families should be recognized as integral partners in the planning and delivery of services
- Service should be seamless and support key transitions of children and youth
- Children should have a single plan of care that links to all individual planning processes, including the Individual Education Plan (IEP)

Integrated Rehabilitation Services

Many children and youth supported by Easter Seals Ontario require therapy services, including occupational therapy, speech-language pathology and physiotherapy services. Many will also require special equipment to assist with mobility, fine and gross motor skills, communication, and activities of daily living.

Easter Seals Ontario believes:

- Rehabilitation services should be delivered to children in their home, at child care centres, in schools and within the local community
- Services should be seamless and service disruptions should be minimized at key transitions, such as starting school
- Rehabilitation services should focus on early identification and intervention and be responsive to child's changing needs over time
- A range of evidence-based services should be available to meet the individual needs of children and youth
- Families should be actively involved in the development of service plans and the delivery of therapy supports
- Public funds should be available to cover the costs of equipment required by children and youth to participate at school, in the community and at home
- Families should be assisted to identify and access all sources of financial assistance to cover the cost of equipment

Service Planning Coordinators

One transfer payment agency in each region will be funded to have Service Coordinators for families. According to the Ministry website, these individuals *"will not be gatekeepers for access to services and will not be responsible for assessing eligibility for individual services"*.

The Service Planning Coordinators will be very important to families supported by Easter Seals Ontario who often have complex needs. It is critical that they not be gatekeepers, but that there should be an accountability process to ensure that individual plans are implemented.

Service Planning Coordinators should foster parent capacity and empower families. They should be able to provide differentiated responses related to the unique needs and capacity of each family. Each family is different and they may require different levels of support in developing care plans for their child. Service Planning Coordinators should be responsive to social and cultural differences.

Caseloads should be manageable, recognizing that many families will need support over a twenty year period. As far as possible continuity of staff should be encouraged as effective support is based on relationships and trust.

Easter Seals Ontario believes:

- Service planning coordinators should be:
 - Well qualified with the skills and experience necessary to support families and advocate on behalf of families in multiple service sectors.
 - Children and their families should be treated with dignity and respect for their circumstances and beliefs
 - Easy to access by families
 - Responsive to individual and diverse needs of families
 - Respectful of cultural and social diversity
 - Maintain long term connections that respond to the changing needs of the child
 - Empower families to advocate for themselves and their child's needs
 - Support the advocacy efforts of families
 - Welcomed as team participants in the education, health and social service settings

It is Easter Seals Ontario's belief that with this strategy in place across the province, the vision of this strategy will be met.

VISION

"An Ontario where children and youth with special needs get the timely and effective services they need to participate fully at home, at school, in the community, and as they prepare to achieve their goals for adulthood".