

VIEW FROM QUEEN'S PARK: PTSD & increased autism funding

By Chris Ballard, MPP
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Those who work on the frontline keeping us safe need to know we've got their backs. With family in the Canadian military, I'm particularly sensitive to how we treat those who run toward danger, rather than from it.

With that in mind, I'm so pleased to be a member of a provincial government that has the backs of our emergency service workers if they develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) because of their job.

The government recently amended legislation to create a presumption that PTSD in Ontario's 73,000 first responders is work-related, leading to faster access to Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) benefits and proper treatment. The legislation covers firefighters, police, paramedics, emergency response teams, correctional officers, youth service workers and those involved in dispatching police, firefighters and ambulance service.

Evidence shows that first responders are at least twice as likely, compared to the general population, to suffer from PTSD, due to the risk of frequent exposure to traumatic events.

As a Councillor I got to know a number of local firefighters and learned about the stresses of modern firefighting ? most of which doesn't come from fighting fires anymore.

As Labour Minister Kevin Flynn noted when the legislation passed, ?This Act is an important step forward in recognizing the importance of psychological health in the workplace, and it will provide first responders and their families with peace of mind.?

I am glad to see that our government is taking these important steps to improve the lives of our first responders and I am hopeful that this support will bring them peace of mind.

Autism Funding

As a newly-elected MPP, I was shocked at the number of very stressed parents who visited my office looking for help to access care for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

There are an estimated 40,000 children and youth in Ontario with ASD. Prevalence rates have risen a shocking 123 per cent in the past decade. Experts tell us that in 2002, one in 150 children was diagnosed with autism. By 2010, that number had risen to one in 68 children.

Parents told me about waits for care that were far too long, and about financial sacrifices they had to make to find treatment for their children. Clearly, something had to be done to help these children and youth, and their families.

I'm glad to say that as part of the 2016 Budget, Ontario committed to invest \$333 million over the next five years to launch the new Ontario Autism Program, which will provide children and youth with critical interventions faster, and provide services that are better matched to their needs.

The newly expanded children's autism program will make it easier for families to access services for their children by reducing wait times, providing more flexible services based on children's needs, and serving more children and youth. It will also help children receive intensive therapy services during the key early developmental years.

Within two years, provincial average wait times for children's autism services are projected to drop by more than half.

The new approach was crafted with advice from families, clinical experts and the Autism Spectrum Disorder Clinical Expert Committee. It is consistent with current scientific evidence and will provide a more responsive support. The transition to the new Ontario Autism Program will happen over the next two years.

?Families raising children with autism have been waiting a long time for this announcement. Providing early, evidence-based intervention, when it matters most, will set children with autism on the best path forward. This investment will set the stage for continuous learning for years to come,? said Margaret Spoelstra, the Executive Director of Autism Ontario, following the announcement.

I encourage parents with questions to call my constituency office. I truly believe these changes will be of help to children and youth with ASD, and their families.

Around town

Congratulation to Aurora's Shirley Cook on her 90th birthday. It was great to meet this wonderful woman at her birthday party. And thank you to KAIROS York Region for organizing a conference recently on poverty. It was enlightening to share the stage with

Radha Bhardwaj, the Executive Director of Blue Door Shelters, and Craig Stevenson, Housing & Peer Support Specialist with CMHA York Region. I was happy to share with the audience the progress the province is making on implementing its Poverty Reduction Strategy.

I invite you to contact me on any issue. Please call my community office at 905-750-0019, or visit my website at www.ChrisBallardMPP.ca. My email is: cballard.mpp.co@liberal.ola.org. I look forward to hearing from you.