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Statement on Federal Strategies for Autism Spectrum Disorders

Autism spectrum disorder is a complex neurological diagnosis currently impacting more than 515,000 Canadians. As a spectrum disorder, autism affects each individual differently. While some individuals will require little to no support to live happy and healthy lives, others may experience pervasive communication and adaptive functioning challenges that can be life threatening, such as severe self-injury. For many individuals with autism, evidence-based treatments are a medical necessity that promote safety, independence, and community inclusion.

Federal leadership on autism spectrum disorder is needed now. During the last several decades provincial governments across the country have struggled to develop, fund and effectively deliver evidence-based treatments for autistic people¹ across the lifespan. Access to (and standards of) evidence-based services vary considerably among provinces. It is critical for a national strategy to include scientific review and access to evidence-based practice.

Canada has already developed strong federal-provincial partnerships for issues typically within the “provincial jurisdiction” when those issues are recognized as requiring coherence and leadership at the national level. The 2018-2027 shared health priorities for home and community care and mental health and addiction services include signed bilateral agreements which ensure improved data collection, program performance management, additional caregiver supports, enhanced support to navigate existing services, and **federal funding for “child and youth mental health services to reduce wait times by enhancing community-based child and youth mental health services and supports, including cost-effective early intervention services, as well as intensive treatment services.”** We are confident that Canada can demonstrate the same leadership in supporting individuals with autism spectrum disorder, and those with other developmental conditions.

Given the demonstrated benefits of behaviour analytic interventions, timely access to such services can offset the lifetime cost of caring for and supporting individuals with ASD. These costs are estimated to be between \$2-\$5.5 million per individual (Dudley & Emery, 2016). In contrast, timely access to intensive ABA services is estimated to result in long-term cost savings between \$656,000 and \$3.7 million per individual (Chasson, Harris, & Neely, 2007; Jacobson, Mulick, & Green, 1998; Larsson, 2012). These cost savings may be related to a variety of factors including but not limited to increased independence, decreased dependency on caregivers, decreased challenging behaviours and thus decreased psychiatric hospitalizations (e.g., Mandell, 2008; Motiwala et al., 2006). Evidence-based treatments promote inclusion, safety, and improved quality of life.

A national platform that includes a strategy for improving access to evidence-based medically necessary treatment is responsible and humane. Improvements in access to housing, gainful employment, research, and awareness are all vital components of an effective national strategy and access to treatment cannot be ignored. Thus, it is critical that all federal parties must commit to improving access to evidence-based services.

No one organization has the ability to bring about and sustain the supports needed to significantly improve the quality of life of individuals with ASD and their families. It will be our collective efforts working in concert that will make a difference. To this end, behavioral researchers and clinicians

¹We recognize that some individuals prefer person-first language (e.g., person with autism) and some prefer identify-first (e.g., autistic person) so we have used interchangeably throughout.

from across the country add their voice to the dialogue about how the federal government can contribute to improvements in the supports that many individuals with autism and their families rely on. We remain committed to working with individuals with autism, their families, practitioners and policy makers to ensure the provision of the most effective treatment and supports for individuals with autism across the country.

Sincerely,

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