



October 3, 2011

Ms. Caroline Stone
Chair, Board of Directors
Ontario Association of Children's Rehabilitation Services
150 Kilgour Road
Toronto, Ontario
M4G 1R8

Dear Ms. Stone:

Thank you very much for your letter on behalf of the Ontario Association of Children's Rehabilitation Services (OACRS). Supporting our children and families is of the utmost importance to Ontario Liberals. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to our current record and future plans to ensure that Ontario's most vulnerable children and their families have the supports and services that they need, when and where they need them.

Ontario Liberals are putting families first. We have made the health, well-being and prosperity of our children and families the focus of our work over the past eight years — and we look forward to doing the same over the next four.

I want to thank the OACRS for the invaluable work you do every day to support children with special needs. As I travel across the province meeting with Ontario families, I hear first-hand how our children's treatment centres and children's rehabilitation services are changing lives and helping children thrive. Ontario Liberals are immensely proud to be your partners. Working together, we have made great progress for so many of our most vulnerable children.

And we are proud of the investments we have made. Since 2003, we have:

- Increased funding by 64 per cent for core rehabilitation services at children's treatment centres to over \$91.4 million
- More than doubled funding for complex special needs to \$73.9 million
- Provided more than \$400 million for child and youth mental health services, and are spending an additional \$257 million over the next three years as part of our children's mental health strategy

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- Increased funding by 51 per cent, to \$103 million, for the Special Services at Home program, which provides direct funding to families to purchase supports
- Increased funding by 50 per cent for Assistance for Children with Severe Disabilities to \$94 million
- More than quadrupled the autism budget from \$44 million to almost \$186.6 million, and tripled the number of children receiving intensive behavioural intervention (IBI) therapy.

The progress we have made is in sharp contrast to the cuts promised by the PCs, who have repeatedly voted against increases to supports and services for children with special needs. Similarly, the NDP's proposed tax increases would kill jobs, at the worst possible time. Strong social programs and support for Ontario's most vulnerable are made possible through a strong economy.

We know that every investment Ontario Liberals have made, and every support and service you provide, has a real and direct impact on our families. Thank you for sharing the OACRS Impact Project final report regarding the impact of our most recent investment of \$9 million for children's treatment centres. Hearing from families first-hand reinforces that our efforts are making a difference for families in need. We share your sentiments that families need to make informed decisions regarding which party will best support them over the next four years. We are proud of our track record and will continue to work in collaboration with the OACRS to continue to make progress for our children and families.

1. Wait lists and wait times for rehabilitation services puts pressure on families. What would your party do to reduce the amount of time families need to wait?

Ontario Liberals are committed to continuing to improve services and supports for children with special needs. We are working diligently to help provide greater access to services and reduce wait times. In the 2011 Budget, we committed to providing \$66 million over three years, starting in 2011–12, to continue helping children and youth with complex special needs and their families by making services more accessible, better coordinated and more responsive.

As part of our Best Start vision for children and families, we will establish Ontario Best Start Child and Family Centres. Parents will know where to go for information, supports and services related to their child's early development, regardless of where they live or how services are offered in their community. These include: parenting supports and resources, language, vision and literacy programs, health services, screening and assessment, play-based learning programs, and supports and services for children with special needs.

By contrast, the PCs voted against our recent increases for children's treatment centres, which means that about 3,600 children and youth with special needs would still be waiting for treatment if they had been in office.

2. All children in Ontario will be entering full day kindergarten. For some children with special needs, they will need extra therapy supports (distinct from special education). What will your party do to ensure that they have the services they need to succeed?

Ontario Liberals believe that full-day kindergarten (FDK) will help put all of Ontario's children on the road to success. We know that cross-government collaboration is key to ensuring seamless supports for children with special needs. Our Education, Children and Youth, and Health ministries are working closely to support children with special needs/special education needs to participate in full-day kindergarten and before- and after-school programs. One example of this collaboration is the launch of seven demonstration projects last month in communities across the province — projects that will focus on improving access and quality in the delivery of speech and language services for young children. We will learn from these projects as we seek to improve access to other important children's services.

Total special education funding for FDK is currently about \$47 million and will grow proportionately with program funding as FDK is expanded into more schools. In addition, we are now in the process of working through the Special Needs/Special Education Reference Group to learn more about how this approach is working at the local level in order to inform future decisions.

We are committed to fully implementing FDK by September 2014, so that all kindergarten students, including those who require special education programs and services, can benefit from the program. We will continue to work with school boards, parents and community service agencies to meet the needs of students with special needs/special education needs.

3. Funding in the children's rehabilitation sector is unpredictable. In order to provide services to families when they need them, we need a fair and sustainable funding system. Will your party commit to establishing a reliable funding formula for children's services so we can build the capacity of our services to meet the needs of families?

We are committed to providing the necessary supports needed so that all our children can reach their greatest potential. Our track record demonstrates that we put Ontario's children first — and we will continue to do so.

Since 2003, Ontario Liberals have:

- Increased funding by 64 per cent for core rehabilitation services at children's treatment centres to over \$91.4 million
- More than doubled funding for complex special needs to \$73.9 million
- Increased funding for students with special education needs by 55 per cent — a total provincial investment of \$2.52 billion.

Under the PCs, education funding was slashed and special needs students were not getting the individual support they needed in the classroom. Ontario Liberals are committed to making sure that families of children with special needs receive the supports they need and deserve.

4. Having a child with a disability is very expensive. What is your party's plan to improve the financial supports for families of children with special needs so that they are not financially disadvantaged?

We understand that families who have children with special needs face emotional and financial hardships — and that we all have a responsibility to help out however we can. Our respite services for children with complex needs and autism are providing much-needed support for families. And our Special Services at Home program provides direct funding to families to purchase supports.

We introduced the Ontario Child Benefit (OCB), reaching over one million Ontario children and making a positive difference in their lives. Currently we provide up to \$1,100 annually per child to low-income families. We will build on this by growing our investment to \$1,310 in 2013.

The OCB is a transformative initiative, with a significant impact on low-income Ontario families. Its introduction marked a turning point in how we deliver benefits to low-income families and is a key component of our ongoing fight against financial hardship for our families.

5. As children become adults, this is a time of great uncertainty for families. Many of the services available to children are no longer available when they turn adult age. What will your party do to ensure that the transition to adulthood is seamless and will allow our sons and daughters to live with as much independence as possible?

Ontario Liberals recognize that early planning is important and must include the individual, their support network and current service providers for the best possible outcomes for youth as they transition into adulthood. That is why we developed the Provincial Transition Planning Framework for Young People with Developmental

Disabilities. It will help young people prepare for adulthood and plan for adult services by promoting social inclusion, greater self-reliance and independence. Young people and their families will have better access to information, improved service continuity and greater control over the decisions that affect them. We also currently provide transition supports for adolescents that focus on crisis intervention, behavioral supports and skill-based training.

In addition, Developmental Services Ontario, which opened this past July, will play a role in assessing needs and providing information about adult services that may be available to support young adults. It gives people a single window to find information on, and apply for, adult developmental services and supports.

As we continue to transform the developmental services sector, we know there are immediate needs for additional services and supports across the province. Since 2003, Ontario Liberals have invested over \$550 million in new ongoing funding for developmental services — a 55 per cent increase. In the last Budget, we provided an additional \$40 million for developmental services — \$15 million dedicated to the Passport and Special Services at Home programs.

We continue to prioritize improved transitions for children and youth, as reflected in our recent investments, including our children's mental health strategy. Our commitment of \$257 million to child and youth mental health over the next three years will translate into investments in a number of initiatives that focus on improving transitions for children and youth.

6. What is your party's position on the importance of children? What will your government do to ensure children in need of extra services and supports are a high priority when deciding on budgets?

Ontario Liberals believe that children are precious. They are our future — and deserve every opportunity to find success.

Ontario Liberals are the only party to put children and families first in a way that is making a real difference in the lives of Ontarians. We strengthened our public education system and supported students so they are now competing with the best in the world — test scores are up, graduation rates are up and class sizes are down. We introduced FDK and the OCB, and we have enhanced supports for children with special needs. We know that prioritizing our children is central to the health, vitality and prosperity of our great province.

If re-elected we will continue to make children a priority, and our *Forward. Together.* plan outlines a number of our commitments in that regard. Once FDK is fully in place, Ontario Liberals will make sure all schools offer an after-school program for 6–12-year-

olds: this is good for both children and parents. We will also offer new summer learning camps in every school board, lending a hand to children who need help the most. Our children's mental health strategy will continue to be rolled out and will touch the lives of some 50,000 young Ontarians — and we will increase the OCB to up to \$1,310 per child, per year.

Ontario Liberals will also focus on making children healthier. Childhood obesity rates have skyrocketed, and scientists say this generation of children could actually have a shorter lifespan than their parents. We cannot let this happen. Ontario Liberals will create a council on childhood obesity, whose goal will be a 20 per cent reduction in the childhood obesity rate within five years. We will start by implementing a healthy snack program in all elementary schools and get our children moving by doubling our Children's Activity Tax Credit, from \$50 to \$100 per child.

Ontario Liberals will continue to make our children a priority by ensuring they get the best possible education and lead healthy and active lives. We will also ensure that our most vulnerable children have the supports they need — and deserve — to achieve their full potential.

Ms. Stone, thank you for the opportunity to respond — and please accept my best wishes.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dalton McGuinty". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dalton McGuinty
Leader of the Ontario Liberal Party
Premier