

Update on the Ontario Autism Program (OAP)

Information about the selection process for OAP service providers

Message from Jennifer Morris, Assistant Deputy Minister
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I am writing to share an update on the next steps the ministry is taking to implement the new Ontario Autism Program (OAP).

In December 2019, aligned with the recommendations of the Autism Advisory Panel, the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) announced a new needs-based, sustainable and family-centred OAP, including a broad range of services that will offer families more supports for their children's specific needs.

In the new needs-based OAP, all children/youth up to age 18 with a written diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) from a qualified professional will be eligible to register for the program. The new program will include the following service pathways and program supports:

- **Core clinical services** that include applied behaviour analysis, speech language pathology, occupational therapy and mental health services

- **Foundational family services** for all families in the program, to build their capacity to support their children's learning and development;
- **Caregiver-mediated early years programs and entry to school services** to help young children access critical services when they will benefit most, and to prepare them to enter school;
- **Urgent response services** to support children and youth who are in service, or are waiting for service, and have significant and immediate needs; and,
- **Care Coordinators** to support families throughout their service journey by providing orientation to the program, service planning and navigation, and help with managing transitions.

The OAP Implementation Working Group that was established in December 2019 has been meeting regularly since January 2020 to provide advice on the implementation and operationalization of a number of these program elements.

In August 2020, building on virtual and remote services introduced during COVID-19, MCCSS launched Foundational Family Services. These services are currently available to all families immediately upon registering for the OAP and through their child's service journey up to 18 years of age. Families can access a range of evidence-informed services, such as family and peer mentoring and caregiver workshops, to help to build family capacity to support their child or youth's learning and development.

MCCSS will continue to work with service delivery partners to expand these services so that families have greater access to the capacity-building supports they need, when and where they need them.

As MCCSS moves ahead with the implementation of the new service pathways and program supports, we will also be releasing several calls for proposals over the coming weeks and months to select service providers for the caregiver-mediated early years programs, the Independent Intake Organization, urgent response services, and entry to school services.

We are sharing information about these upcoming processes so that you are aware of all available opportunities and can begin to consider which services you may be interested in applying to deliver alone or in partnership with another organization. Information about these processes will also be posted on MCCSS's website at ontario.ca/Autism. An update on these calls and next steps will also be shared with families via social media announcements and updates on the ministry's website.

1. **Call for Applications for Caregiver-mediated Early Years Programs** – is being released in December 2020. This selection process will be open to public and private providers in the autism and special needs sectors.

Caregiver-mediated early years programs will be time-limited services for young children based on their individual needs. These programs will be available to children who are registered with the OAP and are between the ages of 12 to 48 months. These evidence-based programs will help young children learn new skills and meet individualized goals in the areas of social communication and play and build the capacity of caregivers to support their children. In parent/caregiver-mediated services, parents/caregivers learn therapeutic strategies from professionals and are supported to use these strategies with their child.

Once the application process is complete and providers have been selected, these programs will begin to be implemented in April 2021.

- 2. Call for Applications for an Independent Intake Organization (IIO)** – anticipated to be distributed in December 2020. This selection process will be open to both existing government-funded service providers and non-government funded providers (non-profit and for-profit) within Ontario.

The **Independent Intake Organization** will be accountable to MCCSS for the oversight and administration of key elements of the OAP provincially and within each of the five MCCSS defined regions. With the goal of delivering a coordinated, integrated and family-centered OAP service delivery model across Ontario, key responsibilities of the IIO will include, but are not limited to:

- Managing the intake and registration of children and youth entering the OAP, coordinating access to priority pathways and managing the provincial waitlist for core clinical services;
- Administering the allocation and associated reconciliation of OAP funding to families;
- Establishing an integrated and coordinated network of service providers in each of the five MCCSS regions;
- Employing and training Care Coordinators who will be responsible for the determination of needs process and will act as a family's main point of contact in the OAP;
- Promoting quality improvement and capacity-building initiatives within the Regional Service Networks; and,
- Coordinating a dispute resolution process for families.

- 3. Community-Based Proposal Process for Urgent Response Services (URS)** – anticipated to be distributed in January 2021. This selection process will be open to publicly funded service providers in the autism and special needs sectors that, through a community-based process, will be expected to develop collaborative, multi-disciplinary proposals to implement urgent response services in a MCCSS defined region, subject to ministry requirements..

Urgent Response Services will be available for any child or youth registered in the OAP who meets specific eligibility criteria. URS will provide time-limited services and supports to eligible children/youth to respond rapidly to a specific need and prevent further escalation of risk of harm to a child/youth, others and/or property. Services may include:

- Short-term, interdisciplinary consultation with a child/youth's intervention team and/or family and/or educator(s);
- Respite up to a maximum number of hours and duration;
- Service navigation to existing services outside of the OAP; and,
- Direct support to the family and/or professionals involved to implement intervention and/or therapy techniques with the child/youth (e.g. mediator model intervention).

- 4. Call for Applications for Entry to School Program** – anticipated to be distributed in March 2021. This selection process will be open to public and private providers and will include an expectation that applicants will engage their local school boards in developing their applications.

The **Entry to School Program** will be a six-month group-based skill-building program for young children, 3 to 5 years of age, who are entering school for the first time and will be focused on preparing them to enter school. Following the group-based program, children will receive transition supports as they enter school, and access transition support for their first six months in school, to support a successful school transition.

The ministry is exploring opportunities to identify potential early adopters in a few communities who could begin to implement the program in spring 2021. Providers selected through the provincial call for applications process will begin to implement the program in early 2022 for children starting school that fall.

As the various calls are distributed, MCCSS will host information sessions to provide interested organizations with the opportunity to ask questions about these processes.

If you have questions regarding the new OAP, or the upcoming calls for proposals/ services, please visit our website ontario.ca/Autism for more information.

I thank you for your continued support and commitment to children on the autism spectrum and their families.

Jennifer Morris