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## Province `to fix' disability backlog

### Some rules unfair, minister admits Allowances delayed up to 8 months

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KERRY GILLESPIE

QUEEN'S PARK BUREAU

A backlog in approving disability allowances that is robbing Ontario families of months of payments is totally unacceptable, says Community and Social Services Minister Sandra Pupatello.

"Some of the rules that have been there historically are unfair, and we've got to ... make them fair and make them easier for people," she said yesterday.

The *Star* reported Wednesday that Ontario's Ombudsman, André Marin, had launched an investigation into the Ontario Disability Support Program.

Pupatello said she hopes to come up with solutions by the time Marin issues his report at the end of the month.

In Ontario, severely disabled children receive monthly support under the Assistance for Children with Severe Disabilities program but must change programs when they turn 18. This has led to a disruption in ODSP benefits in many cases.

Marin began his probe earlier this month after his office received more than 70 complaints of lengthy delays in getting approval. The government's refusal to retroactively pay more than four months of allowances meant families were being short-changed thousands of dollars.

But the Ministry of Community and Social Services has known about the problem for at least six months and has been conducting an internal review, Pupatello said.

"I don't need to wait for the ombudsman to figure out we have a problem here," she said, adding that some administrative changes had already been made.

That's not nearly good enough for Henry Aukema, whose 18-year-old daughter, Lyndsey, has myotonic dystrophy and cerebral palsy.

"She's (the minister's) just shown where her priorities are — or where they aren't.

"It's outrageous if they've known about it for six months and they haven't gotten around to fixing it yet," said Aukema, a farmer near London, Ont.

Lyndsey has trouble walking, has the mental capacity of a toddler, and will never be able to care for herself. Her condition entitles her to receive monthly support from the ODSP.

An eight-month delay in having Lyndsey's case approved after changing programs has left the family without three monthly cheques of \$730 each.

Even though the government is responsible for the months of delay in switching programs because of understaffing, the government will retroactively pay only four months.

"That really is unfair. It's incumbent on us to deal with our volumes," Pupatello said.

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"Historically it's just been there. There's no other reason than that," Papatello said. When asked why she didn't just change the rule, she said: "I'm hoping we'll have some positive changes there. I can't say anything with certainty until it's done."

The ombudsman expects to have his investigation and recommendations for change complete later this month.

"What I hope will happen is that by the time he lands his report I'm also in a position to have found ways to solve the problems," Papatello said.

Much of the problem has simple roots: too much work, too few staff.

The number of staff in the community and social services ministry was cut by a third under the former Progressive Conservative government of Mike Harris and they haven't been replaced.

On top of that, the number of Ontario Disability Support Program cases goes up 3 per cent a year, she said.

"We've gotten locked into a structure that is ill-equipped to deal with this many people and you were bound to get these kind of delays and we just have to fix this," she said.

There may also be a need to streamline the approval process and make it less complicated, she said.

"We have to strike a proper balance between a ridiculous amount of paperwork and the right amount to be accountable to the public for the money we're spending."



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