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Editorial: Red tape ensnares Ontario's disabled

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Governments are often best judged by how they treat the most vulnerable members of society. By that measure, charges that young adults in Ontario with severe disabilities have been losing out on monthly financial-support payments because the provincial government application system is backed up are deeply disturbing.

The *Star's* Kerry Gillespie reported yesterday that Ontario Ombudsman André Marin has launched an investigation into the shocking allegations. Marin started the probe after receiving more than 70 complaints about the government's income-support program for the disabled.

His findings are expected in two weeks. If he determines the charges are true, then the government should take immediate corrective actions.

Currently, Ontario provides special monthly income-assistance grants for both disabled children and adults. Until age 18, children can receive up to \$400 a month under the Children with Severe Disabilities program. Size of the grant is based on their special needs and their parents' income. Starting at age 18, they can receive grants of up to \$959 for a single person under another initiative, the Ontario Disability Support Program.

But during the transition from one program to the other, families find themselves navigating a bureaucratic labyrinth. Long administrative delays have resulted in lost benefits to people already struggling financially.

Many parents, anticipating delays in processing an application, seek to apply well in advance of their child's 18th birthday. In one case, a parent was told to wait three months before his child turned 18 to apply. It then took a total of eight months to get approval. But because of a ministry regulation setting a four-month retroactivity deadline, benefits for the additional months were not paid by the government. This is unacceptable.

Marin's initial investigation has already uncovered other situations of prolonged delays in approvals. Add to that government forms that are long and confusing, even to experienced family doctors, and it is little wonder that the process is leaving so many applicants and their families humiliated, frustrated and at a loss.

Community and Social Services Minister Sandra Pupatello said yesterday she has known for six months of the backlog within the program and has started her own internal review of the application system. She rightly said that the four-month rule, which takes money out of the pockets of the disabled while rewarding bureaucratic foot-dragging, should be removed. And she added she hopes to have solutions to the backlog ready by the time Marin releases his report at the end of March.

Pupatello may be right that her ministry is understaffed, but there is no excuse for letting this practice continue for as long as it has, especially if she and her officials have known about it for six months.

For disabled people entering adulthood, life is already sufficiently filled with obstacles to have to spend more time fighting government red tape.

It would take only a little more effort and a little more compassion for the Ontario government to resolve this issue. Doing so would go some way toward countering the impression of a government that has allowed a well-intentioned initiative to go off the rails so badly.

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