

Funding cut while wait-lists grow for special needs kids

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What Leeann Brasil wouldn't do for a crumb from the billion-dollar table being set for all those dignitaries attending the G8 and G20 summits. Not for herself and her husband Armindo but for their 3-year-old son Christian and all the other children whose special needs go unmet because the Ontario government says it doesn't have any money to spare. The Brasils were told by doctors that Christian would never achieve anything. Their son has amazed all the experts. "When I ask for a hug, he gives me one," says his mother. But he also needs constant supervision and often cries for eight or nine hours straight. The family was getting nine hours a week of help through the province's Special Services at Home program. That has been cut to seven, Brasil says. The rest of the time, they are on their own. "We are exhausted, cut off from the world," says Brasil. "People don't even visit any more. They don't know what to say."

On June 1, named Developmental Services Day in Ontario, parents of children with disabilities went to the legislature to try to appeal to social services minister Madeleine Meilleur, who has responsibility for people with disabilities. They came away disappointed. "Meilleur responded by reading a prepared statement that did not address our concerns," says Janis Jaffe-White, co-ordinator of the Toronto Family Network advocacy group. "The crisis situation regarding the inadequacy of the Special Services at Home and other support programs is not looming, it's here," says Jaffe-White. As the family network noted in a letter to MPPs: "The waitlists for Special Services at Home funding are growing. In Toronto alone, there are over 1,200 children languishing on the list and the number increases daily. "We get calls constantly from parents who say that their son or daughter has been wait-listed and they have been informed not to expect anything for a long time. They are living in limbo. They are languishing with no hope in sight."

Ontario's new developmental services Act is scheduled to take effect officially sometime within the next few months, a spokesperson for Meilleur says. Called the *Services and Supports to Promote the Social Inclusion of Persons with Developmental Disabilities Act*, it promises to improve the province's developmental services system. "With the new Act, we can build a system of services and supports that: is fair, so that everyone gets treated the same way; is flexible, so that people's needs are addressed; and lasts for a long time," the Ministry of Community and Social Services boasts on its [website](#).

The old developmental services law provided services mainly for people living in government-run institutions, the website explains. The new law "will help people with a developmental disability live with more independence and choice."

Fine words but hollow-sounding to Jaffe-White.

In fact, she says, services have been decreasing, with families like the Brasils seeing their hours cut. "The crisis is worsening," says Jaffe-White. "Wait-lists are growing." Under-funding is short-changing young children, preventing young people with disabilities from participating in community activities and forcing young adults with inadequate support into long-term-care facilities designed for seniors, she says.

"We know that there are more people who still need support and we will continue to do more," a spokesperson for Meilleur says.

For Brasil, it can't happen soon enough. "It's not about what we want, it's what we need," she says.