

# Mom of autistic child says suicide try a cry for help

The woman says that before her overdose the only help she was getting for her daughter was 40 days a year of respite care and \$233 monthly — money she used to pay for temporary relief workers.

KIMPEMBERTON  
VANCOUVER SUN

A Coquitlam woman unable to get the necessary services from the children and families ministry for her disabled child tried to commit suicide in frustration, an official with the Autism Society of B.C. says.

In a letter to the supervisor of the children and families ministry, society program director

Debra Pugh writes the ministry is to blame for this near tragedy.

"As [the mother] did request support when she required it and was ignored, the responsibility for this potential tragedy appears to rest with MCF," Pugh wrote in a letter, obtained by *The Vancouver Sun*.

"At the Autism Society we see many families pushed to the lim-

its of their endurance by the extraordinary demands of their autistic children and the lack of adequate supports," writes Pugh. "In the overwhelming number of cases, the problem is not that the family is lacking in natural resilience but that the stresses are unimaginable to those who have not lived through them."

Pugh noted the woman is a good mother who has struggled

alone for the past four years trying to raise her autistic daughter and two other children in a one-bedroom basement suite.

The woman says that in early February she asked the ministry to temporarily place her six-year-old daughter in a foster home because she couldn't cope with her situation. The mother says nothing was done.

On March 28, the woman took an overdose of 200 pills, saying she thought her death would finally enable the child to get the help she needed.

Ministry officials were unavailable for comment.

The woman lives in the Simon Fraser-Burnaby region. Last week, an internal ministry memo was leaked to the press which indicates the resource system in that particular district is so overwhelmed it "has come to a grinding halt."

The memo, written March 20 by a ministry resource supervisor, said social workers had lost their ability to make emergency placements as "children and youth are unable to move out of our receiving homes."

The mother, who agreed to be interviewed by *The Vancouver Sun* as long as she was not identi-

fied, said she was frustrated the ministry social worker assigned to help the family wasn't returning phone calls in the weeks before her suicide attempt.

"It took me a long time to make a decision to put my daughter in foster care. I love her so much but her behaviors are so bad I couldn't cope anymore. I thought I'd get help right away by putting her in a foster home. But I didn't," said the woman. "Then I thought it would be easier if I wasn't alive to get help for her."

The girl was placed into foster care following her mother's suicide attempt.

The mother said that before her suicide attempt the only help she was getting for her daughter was 40 days a year of respite care and \$233 monthly. She said she used this money to pay someone to come into the home and give her a break from her daughter, who she says attacks her younger sister and screams whenever they go out in public.

"I can't take her out in public because her fits are so extreme," said the woman, who has been two years on the waiting list for a child-care worker, whose role is to help integrate children into the community.

Social service agencies that deal with families of children with special needs say this case illustrates how it often takes a crisis before a family gets the necessary resources from the ministry for children and families.

"In essence the lack of respite, child-care consultants and behavioral therapy is forcing people into the child protection system," said Rhonda Garside, executive director of the Autism Society of B.C.

"Some families are being encouraged to surrender their child to get the services they need. It's disgusting."

The B.C. Community Living Association, which represents thousands of disabled children and adults in the province, determined at a meeting last week that long wait lists for services and lack of resources for families throughout B.C. is a key concern for its members.

"I would describe it as a crisis," said BCCLA executive director Laney Bryenton. "There's a sense of despair in families and service providers who don't know how to help because they don't have anything to offer."

Bryenton said wait lists for services are so long that some families have been told they have to wait to even be placed on the wait list and can't even get access to a social worker.

Meanwhile, the office of the B.C. Children's Commission is considering holding a special investigation into the crisis facing disabled children in B.C. An announcement is expected this month.