

Mom pickets for funding to treat son with autism

■ Woman pressures province to change its mind about refusing to pay for program she says is boy's only hope

By MAURICE SMITH
Panfiction Herald

Barbara Rodrigues and a group of supporters of her drive to secure funding for her autistic son picketed a meeting of Ministry of Children and Families' community living services last night.

Rodrigues has been denied funding from the province because the ministry does not approve of the Lovaas treatment she says is the only hope for four-year-old Jeremy.

While the local office has cut her funding, she said other parents in the Lower Mainland continue to receive funding even though they have also started the Lovaas program.

Rodrigues and her husband, Joe, have paid for the treatment themselves for 10 months, though they are finding it increasingly difficult to do so. The couple recently sold their camper due to the ongoing costs.

Rodrigues also continues to picket about an hour a day at ministry offices.

"There is no point in me attending the meeting because they refuse to answer my letters," said Rodrigues of last night's meeting. "They refuse because the Children's Commission is now involved and is investigating this regional office."

She said she is pleased the Children's Commission has agreed to investigate, but still feels she must pressure the province.

"I just want people to realize that we are still without funding and that we still need this treatment. Jeremy has a right to grow up and have a happy life, have a relationship, drive a car and have a job. This government is stealing that right while a small percentage of people are still receiving funding."

Rodrigues believes she is being punished for opening admitting she is pursuing the Lovaas program rather than accepting the money without specifying what program she is using.

"They want to put us back on the government approved programs which do nothing to help Jeremy. This is my way of making a stand and again letting them know that Jeremy's voice still needs to be heard."

The province had funded 20 to 25 per cent of the cost of treatment, or about \$1,000 per month. Funding was cut off after a Surrey family launched a lawsuit seeking full funding for the Lovaas program.

Canadian governments have been slow to recognize the Lovaas program, which was developed by Ivar Lovaas at UCLA and is only taught in the U.S.

Jeremy lacked communication skills and only regressed with other programs before he was enrolled in Lovaas. He rarely slept through the night and had several tantrums a day.

The intensive Lovaas program involves at least 40 hours a week of therapy. Activities are broken down to their smallest tasks and taught as a foundation for more advanced learning.

Jeremy continues to show improvement, Rodrigues said. While a lack of empathy is common for autistic children, Rodrigues said Jeremy for the first time showed concern for her feelings two weeks ago when she dropped a water bottle on her foot.

"He came to me and put his arms around my neck and rested his head on my shoulder," she said. "He is becoming aware of the world around him and other people's feelings."