

# PENTICTON HERALD

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## Mother battles ministry to fund autism treatment

By Penticton Herald Staff

A Penticton woman who is battling the province to have funding for her autistic five-year-old son restored has resumed picketing a year after funding was cut.

Barbara Rodrigues said she will carry a sign down Main Street from Cherry Lane Shopping Centre to provincial government offices on the 1800 block of Main Street every day this week to mark the anniversary.

Rodrigues picketed in front of government offices for more than 100 days last year after funding for treatment was chopped. She was forced to quit to devote more time to her son's therapy program when a therapist had to be let go.

Rodrigues said Jeremy's condition deteriorated under provincial government-mandated programs and he has only shown improvement under the relatively new Lovaas treatment program, which two doctors had recommended.

When she made the switch, the province continued the level of funding Jeremy received for other, approved treatment options. But when a Lower Mainland family started a lawsuit seeking full funding of Lovaas six months later, the province yanked all funding for Jeremy.

While the local Ministry of Children and Families office maintains that is now government policy, Rodrigues has learned families in other districts have continued to receive partial funding even though their children have been enrolled in the Lovaas program.

"Their stance is, they don't provide Lovaas. We know others are funded for it. The people here had the power to keep everything as it was and they chose not to."

The Rodrigues' believe the province is reluctant to provide partial funding because other parents might then demand the full cost.

When questioned in the Legislature about the issue earlier this year, Lois Boone, minister of Children and Families, said Lovaas was among an array of services the ministry was looking at.

The program can cost \$30,000 to \$50,000 a year for the first two years of intensive therapy. After that, costs decline as therapy is scaled back. The province had been providing \$1,000 a month for Jeremy before funding was cut and will provide up to \$1,600 a month for government-approved specialized child care.

Without any funding, the Rodrigues family has had to borrow money and cut back in other areas to continue the Lovaas program.

Rodrigues contends the cost to the province is a bargain if it means autistic children can improve and become productive members of society rather than deteriorate and require financial subsidies for much of their lives.

She took the issue to the office of the Child Commissioner, which recently completed a draft report outlining her position and a response from the ministry. She said the report would go before the commissioner in the next few weeks. The commissioner will then decide whether to refer it to the tribunal division for review.

In the meantime, Jeremy has shown steady improvement. He is learning non-verbal communication and beginning to socialize with others, Rodrigues said. "Jeremy is really doing well. He is learning lots of new things and becoming much more aware."

She is hoping treatment can be scaled back and Jeremy can enter school next September.