Mother fights for autism funds

■ Barbara Rodrigues says the government's decision to cancel subsidy for treatment makes no sense, harms her son

By **MAURICE SMITH**
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The Penticton mother of an autistic child will take her battle for government funding to the public today.

Barbara Rodrigues will man a booth in Cherry Lane Shopping Centre all day today to collect signatures in an effort to restore funding to treat her son that was cut off last summer.

The Ministry of Children and Families cut funding after a Surrey family launched a lawsuit seeking full funding for the Lovaas program, the same program that has led to tremendous improvement in the condition of Rodrigues' four-year-old child Jeremy.

It was in response to the lawsuit that the province issued a directive cutting off funding for Lovaas, Rodrigues said.

The province had funded 20 to 25 per cent of the cost of treatment, or about $1,000 per month. Since then, she has learned many other parents of children with autism in the Lower Mainland continue to get funding.

In fact, as many as 150 other families do, said a Vancouver-area woman who asked for anonymity for fear of putting her own funding in jeopardy.

She considers the intensive early intervention program, developed by Ivar Lovaas at UCLA, the only effective way of dealing with autism. "It's the only proven therapy with any kind of data to support it. People who start with it don't stop because it works," she said.

In some cases, children even lose their diagnosis of autism, she said. But because it is only taught in the U.S., governments in Canada have been slow to recognize it.

"It's a short-term attitude," she said. "(The ministry) is willing to provide baby-sitting, but not willing to reallocate those funds and actually do something for that child."

"She is absolutely being brutalized," the woman said of Rodrigues. "If her child had cancer and was denied treatment, think of the outcry. It's an utter disgrace."

Before Lovaas, Jeremy would rarely make eye contact and had virtually no communication skills. The inability to communicate his own wants and needs intensified his anger. He rarely slept through the night and had several tantrums a day. When Rodrigues returned from an autism conference, she said Jeremy did not even react to her return.

"For two years we were in government programs and he didn't make any progress. He was in a pre-school setting with an aid worker and he never increased his vocabulary or ability with language."

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.

Rodrigues saw immediate results. "Two weeks into the program, he was sleeping through the night and his tantrums were two or three times a week."

The program is expected to run two years, at which time it can usually be scaled back as the child is integrated into a regular classroom.

Rodrigues said the ministry's actions don't make sense. A cost-analysis for early intervention indicates significant saving to the health care system for those who get treatment at an early age.

"We are talking about money that is there," she said of the ministry's funding of other, approved treatment options. "We want him to achieve goals and one day become an independent taxpaying adult."

She said she did not wish to go public, but feels forced into the position. She pickets an hour a day at government offices or in front of shopping malls.

"This is a last resort. I'm not a public person. But it got to the point where I had done all I could."

In the meantime, she and husband Joe will continue to pay the full cost as long as they can.

Though the ministry's August directive states an action plan for consistent directions for children with autism would be complete in late fall, ministry spokeswoman Karen Johnston said it won't be completed until some time in the new year.

She said she could not comment on funding of the Lovaas program because it is before the court.