

Family Net is an independent provincial network that provides a provincial voice for children and youth with special needs, adults with developmental disabilities and their families.

Community Living Update

As we look ahead to 2004 after a year of worry and often chaotic change in 2003, families have much cause for concern regarding the future of Community Living in BC.

Communication

The lack of adequate government communication in the face of significant changes underway to meet budget reduction targets remains a major concern. Many families and individuals are still not aware of how they will be affected. And after repeated delays, promised community consultations on the new governance model appear to have been put on indefinite hold. There's no word on how government will address serious concerns about the proposed model in the context of budget cuts, as voiced during public discussions held earlier in 2003.

Governance

Despite many challenges and delays, governance restructuring is still moving ahead, though it appears to be taking a far different path than anyone envisioned at the outset. The latest deadline for transfer of responsibility to the new provincial Community Living Authority is June 2004. Minister Gordon Hogg has appointed a panel of experts to assess readiness for transfer to the new model, as recommended by his consultants in the Sage Report in September. The report's key recommendation for community living was to reform service delivery and achieve budget reduction targets before implementing the new governance models, rather than both happening at the same time as originally planned. Meanwhile, as plans announced by Hogg in September to appoint a new Interim Authority (IA) board also appear to have run into delays, the IA is being run for now by a scaled-down group from the former board.

Cuts

But in the most worrying recent development, agencies and families are now confronting the third round of budget cuts for community living services for this year, as the ministry seeks to meet the revised budget reduction targets for 2003/04 and 2004/05. In the first round, agencies were forced to offer 5% "voluntary" budget cuts in the spring. In September, the Ministry imposed agency contract funding reductions to reclaim historic overpayments of employee compensation costs, mainly related to sick-leave benefits. Many agencies complained this went far beyond a fair solution for the long-running issue. Now, the ministry has announced it is implementing a series of "initiatives", developed in consultation with the Interim Authority and CL sector, to achieve the budget cuts required for 2003/04. Details are available on the [MCFD Web site](#). The latest cuts are to be achieved through:

- a) New Health and Safety guidelines, which strictly define eligibility for services for health and safety reasons and require a review of eligibility every three months.
- b) Six new cost-cutting initiatives:
 - Introduction of Individualized Funding on a pilot basis, where this will lower the individual's total service delivery costs.
 - "Voluntary" agency cost reductions
 - Reduction in 1:1 Day Programs
 - Review of Highly Specialized Residential Service system to cut costs wherever possible
 - Improved management of Residential vacancies, which also appear to tighten eligibility

Many agencies have been meeting with ministry representatives to deal with these cuts. Then this week the Deputy Minister stipulated in a letter to service providers that they must achieve even more cost reductions, and that failing to do so will result in contracts being re-tendered to obtain lower cost providers and/or reduce the number of service providers (see letter attached). Following this latest development, an urgent meeting of the C.L. Coalition was held Dec. 3, and an emergency meeting of

other community living stakeholders is scheduled for the week of Dec. 8. Hopefully, out of these meetings, a decision on how to proceed will be made.

President's Message

The latest news of a new round of budget cuts to community living is worrying news indeed. It is not clear to what extent families are being involved in decision-making. Reports and examples discussed at our November 28 FamilyNet board meeting clearly suggest there is good reason to worry, particularly with respect to group homes, and other adult services which seem to be a primary target in an apparent shift towards lower-cost alternatives. Of particular concern is the lack of clear and relevant information from both the Ministry and the Interim Authority on how individuals and their families will be affected as the changes are implemented.

FamilyNet supports all reasonable efforts to reform service delivery in order to enhance efficiency, flexibility and innovation so that more needs can be met satisfactorily with limited resources. Our Board is also aware that many families have fought for years to put in place services that finally work well for them, and there is grave concern that these arrangements may be at risk. At the same time, many families have been waiting for years to access resources and supports for their loved ones, and budget reduction targets will make it harder than ever to adequately meet these needs and to cope with future demands as needs continue to grow each year. Solutions that pit family against family, individual against individual, or that shift the burden of responsibility onto families are simply unacceptable. The provincial government must continue to maintain primary responsibility for providing adequate services and supports for all adults with developmental disabilities, youth and children with special needs and their families. That responsibility covers not only health and safety needs but respect for basic human dignity and well being.

FamilyNet wrote to Minister Hogg in November, asking for a meeting to discuss a range of concerns and to offer our help in addressing the issues that families have raised. The Minister has responded stating that his schedule would not permit a meeting before the new year. FamilyNet has also twice written to the Chair and Board of the Interim Authority for Community Living asking for a meeting, but has to date received no response.

At our November 28 meeting, the FamilyNet board agreed to invest in a number of capacity-building initiatives to permit us to serve as a strong and credible focus for family advocacy in 2004. We will continue to monitor events closely over the holiday season as we weigh what actions we can take as an organization early in the new year.

Meanwhile, what can families do? Minister Hogg promised that no changes to existing services would be forced on families or individuals without their agreement. An Advocate for Service Quality office was established in 1992 to address complaints and concerns raised by families and individuals regarding decisions made about their relatives. Complaints to the Advocate's office have been steadily increasing over the last year. It's important for families and individuals to:

- ask to be part of any decisions that will affect the services received by their loved ones. Discuss concerns with the agencies, and social workers. If necessary contact the Office of the Advocate for Service Quality at (604) 775-1238 or if outside Vancouver, call Enquiry BC at (250) 387-6121 or 1-800-663-7867 and ask them to connect you to the Advocate for Service Quality at 604) 775-1238 (no long distance telephone charge).
- share your concerns by writing, calling or meeting with your MLA. We are a small community and many families may feel that writing letters has gotten them nowhere in the past. But even small voices can make a difference when we all speak together with a strong and credible message. Please contact FamilyNet if you would like us to send you sample wording for a letter to your M.L.A. You can find contact information for your MLA at the government website, <http://www.legis.gov.bc.ca/mla/3-1-1.htm>, or look in the blue B. C. government pages of your phone book under "Members of Legislative Assembly".
- please let us know if you have concerns about service changes and how you are affected. This will assist us in building a strong, united and credible advocacy voice for families, adults, youth and children. We ask that you please also share this newsletter with others in your networks.

A strong provincial advocacy voice is urgently needed to protect services for our relatives. Let us all work together to make 2004 the year that families stand together in a firm and effective defense of community living in B. C.

Anita Dadson,
President, B.C. FamilyNet