

Monday, January 11, 2016

Hon. Robert L. Henderson, MLA
Minister of Health and Wellness
PO Box 2000, 105 Rochford Street, 4th Floor North
Charlottetown PE C1A 7N8

Dear Minister Henderson,

Re: New progress report on the state of provincial and territorial child hearing health programs

We are writing on behalf of Speech-Language and Audiology Canada (SAC) and the Canadian Infant Hearing Task Force (CIHTF) to give you an advance copy of the CIHTF's new Early Hearing Detection and Intervention (EHDI) Progress Report and Position Statement, both of which will be officially released on January 18, 2016.

The new progress report is an interim status update on the EHDI Report Card, also included with this letter, which we published on March 25, 2014. While many provinces and territories continue to lack sufficient early hearing health programs, we are pleased to see Prince Edward Island's ongoing commitment towards improvement. In particular, we would like to commend your province for its recent development of a Universal Newborn Hearing Screening (UNHS) database.

While your province's early hearing health program is stronger than those in some other regions, we encourage you to strive for an even more comprehensive EHDI program, which includes everything from newborn hearing screening to timely diagnostic and intervention services.

Overall, the CIHTF's progress report provides a rather disappointing picture of the state of EHDI programs in Canada. We have heard from audiologists and other professionals that funding restrictions, staffing issues and a lack of government commitment are standing in the way of universal access to early hearing health programs. This is troubling given that some experts have described permanent childhood hearing loss as a neurological emergency, and studies have shown that undiagnosed and untreated hearing loss can result in long-term linguistic, cognitive, academic, social and emotional difficulties.

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The upcoming Conference of Federal-Provincial-Territorial Ministers of Health is an opportunity to start a national discussion about EHDI programs in Canada. We encourage you to share your lessons learned with your provincial and territorial counterparts so that they may benefit from P.E.I.'s progress, and to also consult with ministers from regions that have successfully implemented strong EHDI programs, such as British Columbia.

The new federal government appears to welcome increased pan-Canadian collaboration and knowledge sharing. As you are aware, Prime Minister Trudeau's mandate letter to Dr. Jane Philpott, Minister of Health, outlines the following as a top priority:

"... advance pan-Canadian collaboration on health innovation to encourage the adoption of new digital health technology to improve access, increase efficiency and improve outcomes for patients."

Once again, we would like to commend Prince Edward Island for its ongoing investment in early hearing health. We hope you will take time at your meeting later this month to share information about your program with the other ministers. It's time to make children's hearing health a national priority.

Sincerely,



Dr. Chantal Kealey, AuD, Aud(C)

Director of Audiology and Communication Health Assistants
Speech-Language and Audiology Canada



Dr. Steve Aiken, PhD

Chair of the Canadian Infant Hearing Task Force
Associate Professor, Dalhousie University