



Taking Autism Seriously

Canberra**liberals**

18 September 2008



Taking Autism Seriously

A Time for Action

In recent years there has been rising awareness of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) with many more children diagnosed at younger ages. The first major Australian study on the prevalence of ASD reported in 2007 that one in every 160 children aged between 6 and 12 years have an Autism Spectrum Disorder.

While neither the causes nor the cures for disability due to ASD are known, it is clear that early intervention can significantly improve the lives of many children with ASD. Effective intervention can make a huge difference to children, families and their carers. It is important that governments appreciate that people with ASD have distinct needs that generic disability services do not adequately meet.

The reality is that few families can afford by themselves to fund intensive early intervention for a child diagnosed with ASD.

People with Autism Spectrum Disorders need better support than they currently receive from the Stanhope Government. The Stanhope Government's failure to provide adequate treatment, rehabilitation and education for children with ASD means that some children are not able to enjoy a comparable quality of education to other children.

While the Federal Government's (bipartisan) *Helping Children with Autism* package is a first step to recognising the needs of children with ASD, it is only an initial step that needs complementary contributions from the ACT.

For its part, the ACT Government should also show leadership and make an additional investment of its own and make an effort to improve the level of services delivered to Canberra families.

A Canberra Liberal Government is committed to significantly improving services for people with ASD. There are numerous social and economic benefits for the community from ensuring that children with ASD are given early assistance.

The Value of a Genuine Partnership with Parents

A Canberra Liberal Government will work in a full and open partnership with a Canberra's ASD-community, to involve parents and carers in overseeing the design and delivery of services.

Over many years parents and their supporters have been at the forefront in developing and providing desperately needed services and programs for young Australians with autism. Autism associations in other states have been at their most effective where state governments have worked in partnership with them.

- Most state governments fund their state autism associations to address some of the demand for ASD-specific services.
- The level of annual funding to the NSW and SA autism associations from government is \$21.1 million and \$3.7 million respectively.

Families in the ACT are concerned that the Stanhope Government has not sufficiently recognised and sought to address the needs of children with ASD for intensive autism-specific early intervention. The Stanhope Government has not done enough to involve parents or to follow the approaches outlined in the Federal Government's Best Practice Guideline.

In the ACT, Therapy ACT provides a range of multidisciplinary therapy and support services for people with disabilities and developmental delay. However some ASD representatives argue that the early intervention strategies are insufficient and can be better targeted. Many children do not receive early intervention of the type and intensity that they need.

The Stanhope Government has provided no direct funding for Autism Asperger ACT Inc, unlike the approach in some other states where Autism associations are very closely involved in service delivery and oversight.

Autism ACT operates independently of government and it is supported by passionate people who work hard as careers and supporters of people with Autism Spectrum Disorders. Members of the organisation are powerful advocates for people with Autism Spectrum Disorders. If properly resourced, Autism ACT can provide very valuable oversight of assessment, case management and support.

Real Roles for the ASD Community in Service Design and Delivery

We have seen in a number of policy areas that non-government providers can play a very effective role in delivery of services to needy constituent groups. Non-government organisations are for example very successful at managing services to help the unemployed to become engaged in the workforce and they are very effective in areas like provision of community housing and delivery of supported accommodation.

The Canberra Liberals recognise people with ASD have distinct needs that generic disability services do not meet or address.

Upon winning Government the Canberra Liberals will provide funding for Autism Asperger ACT Inc to scale up its activities, to enable it to increasingly assist in management of support and assessment. We recognise that this organisation is supported by motivated and passionate Canberrans who have an intimate understanding of the specialised needs of individuals and families who are trying to deal with Autism Spectrum Disorders.

We will support the association to do the following.

1. Provide professional advice for families and schools to help manage challenging behaviour from students with Autism Spectrum Disorders.
2. Enhance and distribute their highly regarded Starter Pack for families of children who are newly diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder.
3. Provide an improved resource centre to include an expanded library, computers and therapy rooms that are appropriately resourced and designed.
4. Develop the structure and recruit the expertise required to manage contracts for assessment and support services.
 - Autism ACT will operate alongside Therapy ACT in managing and overseeing services, with a view to improve the adequacy and quality of service delivery. Scrutiny of whole-of-government activity by this independent entity will provide a new level of accountability and rigor.
 - A portion of the funding and services currently delivered through Therapy ACT will be managed by Autism Asperger ACT Inc, with transfers of responsibility to be negotiated as the association develops the expertise and organisational capacity. Under a partnership agreement, the association will complement the work of Therapy ACT by assisting with high-demand areas and providing flexible responses to community need.
 - The focus in the early years may for instance involve Autism Asperger ACT Inc assisting in the important area of early intervention services and assessment.

- 5 Advise government on the future policy direction needed to support people with Autism and Aspergers in the ACT. Autism Asperger ACT Inc will be involved in advising government on how to provide effective ASD-specific early intervention, after-school care, post-school options, respite, advocacy, adult accommodation and employment. A Canberra Liberal Government will seek frank advice, will receive this input directly (unfiltered by officials) and will treat the input of the ASD community seriously.

In the first four years of a Canberra Liberal Government, \$1 million in new funding will be provided to Autism ACT. This will be real new funding, not a re-badging of Commonwealth funding.

In addition a portion of existing funding for service delivery will be transferred to oversight and management by Autism ACT.

	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Funding to Autism Asperger ACT to allow for management of assessment and support, enhanced resources and staff.	50	150	400	412

This commitment is not a complete answer to the needs of people with ASD, but this policy to ensure greater involvement of the ASD community is an important start in an upgrade of service design and delivery.

The Canberra Liberals will be outlining further positive plans for the future before the 18 October election, which will include additional commitments in relation to disability services.

A Canberra Liberal Government will publish reports that clearly disaggregate the sources of funding for ASD services and the breakdown of areas of expenditure. The ACT Government should be open and accountable about its performance, because this is the only way to identify shortcomings and to improve services into the future.

Summary

Members of the ASD community have demonstrated with limited funds how to deliver consistent programs for each child with ASD across a range of settings such as home, school, respite, childcare, after-school care and community activities.

The Stanhope Government has failed to substantially fund the Association or involve it seriously in oversight of services. This government's old-fashioned approach to service-delivery and openness indicates a "we know best" attitude and suggests that the Stanhope Government has not been listening carefully enough to the ASD community over the past seven years.

The Canberra community needs a strong ASD Association, to effectively develop policy for families and children with ASD and to oversight the quality and adequacy of service delivery. A Canberra Liberal Government will involve the ASD community in design and delivery of services, in contrast to the Stanhope Government which has effectively frozen them out.

We will establish effective and appropriate policy mechanisms and will enhance the resources to address ASD needs in the ACT.