

February 21, 2020

To the Auditor General:

Autistics for Autistics Ontario (A4A) is a disability rights group led by autistic people, for autistic people (a4aontario.com). We have concerns about how federal autism funding decisions are being made. Thank you for taking the time to read this letter and answer our questions.

We are concerned about the following: compliance with reporting/public transparency; standards for RFPs and the contract process; due diligence/auditing of agencies receiving or requesting funding; and collection of data (or lack thereof) about return on investment (ROI).

We have flagged potential contradictions of federal funding practices by the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC). We were unable to get responses from PHAC or the Health Ministry about this matter, nor is the information available on the usual open databases, which is why we are contacting you.

Background: The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) manages a fund called *The Autism Spectrum Disorder Strategic Fund*. Last summer (2019), our groups contacted PHAC to get details about what the Fund was, how it was being appropriated, who was consulted in decision-making for dispersion of funds, and how the projects were put out to tender as RFPs.

We had become concerned because we didn't see any evidence that data was informing the agency's funding decisions, other than poor-sample data by the providers seeking the funds. Nor could we find any record of consultation with autistic Canadians, nor whether any demographic data were collected by the Government of Canada to determine the need (or efficacy) of any of the expenditures.

We also discovered that this has been the state of autism funding in Canada for many years.

As well, there is no record of a bidding process for any of the *Autism Spectrum Disorder Strategic Fund* contracts on Buyandsell.gc.ca or any other database, despite these databases listing similar funding for disabilities other than autism.

Example: in October 2018, according to its press release, PHAC appropriated \$10 million, payable to the Pacific Family Autism Network, for building a website and helping some autism groups enhance their offices (the AIDE project). There are no online records or transparency around whether there was an RFP/bidding process for this costly project--nor are copies of the contracts visible to the public. There is also no evidence that this expenditure is meeting a need for autistic Canadians.

Communication process: Because there is no information on the usual government databases, we requested information about the processes behind these expenditure decisions from PHAC

as well as the Minister's office. We asked repeatedly, for 4 months (via email and phone, June-October) and they did not provide any answers.

At first, their offices changed the topic by stating that *we* could also get federal funding. To be clear, we have no interest in receiving funds ourselves; rather, we are requesting transparency about whether there is any independent data confirming that these multi-million dollar projects will be useful in any way to autistic people, whether any vetting happens before these large contracts are awarded to non-profit agencies and whether there are on-going methods for measuring whether these funding decisions are fiscally responsible.

After we made it clear that we did not want any funds but that we were interested in transparency of existing funding, the Ministry and the PHAC refused to answer our emails and severed all communication with us.

This led us to wonder: If these contracts were awarded fairly and in accordance with federal guidelines, why wouldn't PHAC simply reply that they were? And if the departments won't answer us, who will?

Empty database: We again checked Buyandsell.ca. Searches under the search terms "Autism Spectrum Disorder Strategic Fund," "Public Health Agency of Canada," "Pacific Family Autism Centre" and even "Autism" in Buyandsell.gc.ca.

The database came up with zero results for any projects related to autism funded in the past 6 years, and none of the projects listed below.

Information requested: We are asking if you can find answers to the following questions.

1. In October 2018, more than \$10 million was announced for the Pacific Autism Family Network and the Miriam Foundation to develop the Autism-Intellectual-Developmental Disabilities National Resource and Exchange (AIDE) Network, a website that advertises the services of Canadian autism service providers.
 - A. How was the AIDE project tendered?
 - B. Where is the contract—why is it not online like other disability-related contracts?
 - C. How was any need for this project determined?
 - D. What demographic and best-practices research was this expenditure based upon, if any?
 - E. Since the primary beneficiaries of this program are the PAFN and related service agencies themselves, what data was collected or audits done (if any) to determine whether there could be secondary stakeholders/beneficiaries?
 - F. Was there research into the issue of redundancy (considering that similar databases exist); whether the similar existing databases were effective (how much and why or why not); and whether Canadians will access the AIDE database to find local services instead of using Google as they do now?

2. The projects listed below were also funded with no public record of RFPs or any tendering process, nor of any research into their feasibility, reasonableness or sustainability.

List of Funded Projects:

- Autism Nova Scotia's Health Sexuality Research Program, \$800,000;
- Autism Ontario's Mental Health Matters Project, \$524,431;
- Autism Resource Centre's Building Block Program, \$518,964;
- Jake's House for Autistic "Children for The Legends Mentoring Program [sic]", \$600,000 (program does not fund autistic mentoring);
- York University for The Autism Mental Health Promotion Project, \$599,300 and;
- McGill University (Royal Institute for the Advancement of Learning) Caregiver Skills Training Program, \$600,000.

- A. Why were these projects funded without meaningful data about need and research into ROIs in other jurisdictions?
- B. How does the level of due diligence for autism-related projects compare to that of other government funded disability-related expenditures?
- C. If there are two sets of standards for due diligence, why is that?
- D. What is the RFP and bidding process for these projects?
- E. Why aren't the bidding process, contracts or standards of measurement transparent for autism funding, as they are for other expenditures?

Thank you for your consideration of these matters. We hope you will be able to provide answers to our questions. We also hope that by mapping the current landscape of autism funding our government may come up with improved quality assessment measures for better services and increased public confidence in the system of autism funding.