

Amended Liberal autism bill passes, services will be extended

BY DAVE BARTLETT dbartlett@thetelegram.com

THE TELEGRAM

A Liberal private member's bill to extend services for children with autism passed in the House of Assembly Wednesday.

But only after it was amended by Education Minister Darin King.

Liberal Leader Yvonne Jones introduced the bill which notes autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are life long illnesses, the most common neurological disorder affecting children and affect one in 132 people according to statistics from 2008.

The bill asked government to extend current services available for children six and under — including occupational and speech therapy — to all children in the province.

But King asked for four amendments to the bill.

The first three altered language in the bill, including removing the one clause — which says government services for children with autism end at age six — altogether.

The final amendment removed the Liberal's resolution to extend services beyond the age of six and substitutes it to read that the government will "work with the autism society of Newfoundland and Labrador, the regional health authorities, school boards, and with individuals and families touched by autism to enhance the quality of life of persons with autism through progressive improvements to programs and services."

NDP Leader Lorraine Michael shared a number of stories she's heard from families with autistic children when she spoke to the bill.

Michael said she was going to support the bill anyway, and still would, but she said King's amendments "watered down" the bill.

As she closed debate, Jones said she's glad the bill has put the issue on government's radar.

"We are satisfied that government's attention has been drawn to the issue and that they are prepared to work for better solutions," said Jones.

Jones also shared a number of stories she's heard from families who have autistic children and the difficulties they have getting services for their children in the education system.

She said autistic children need extra support in school so they can grow up to be "functional members of society,"



Darin King



Yvonne Jones



Lorraine Michael

Jones said when programs for children end at six, many to regress, and then develop behavioural issues which can lead to expulsion from school.

“Our purpose today, in bringing this motion forward is not to condemn the government for what you’re doing, but to ask you to do more,” said Jones.

She said she hoped the government will now move as soon as possible to meet with families and groups to help children with autism. The amended bill passed unanimously.