



September 4, 2012

The Right Honourable Stephen Harper
Prime Minister of Canada
Office of the Prime Minister
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A2

RE: New Employment Insurance Special Benefit for Parents of Critically Ill Children

Dear Prime Minister,

The Schizophrenia Society of Ontario would like to congratulate you and the federal government for your commitment to caregivers through the proposed new Employment Insurance special benefit for caregivers who take time off work to care for their critically ill or injured children.

The Schizophrenia Society of Ontario is a non-profit province-wide organization with a mission to make a positive difference in the lives of people, families and communities affected by Schizophrenia and Psychotic Illnesses. We are the largest organization representing people affected by schizophrenia and psychosis in Ontario.

Schizophrenia and psychotic illnesses are serious but treatable disorders that have a profound impact on people's day-to-day functioning. Both schizophrenia and psychosis are highly prevalent: about 3% of the population will experience a psychotic episode some time in their life, and 1% will be diagnosed with schizophrenia. About 80% of people with psychosis experience their first episode between age 16 and 30. Similarly, onset of schizophrenia usually occurs in young adults and relapses of acute episodes of psychosis can occur throughout the life span, particularly if the illness is left untreated.

The Schizophrenia Society of Ontario recognizes that mental illnesses not only impact the individual but their family and friends as well who often need to make changes and adjustments to their lives as they continue to support their loved one. If one in five people experience a mental illness in their lifetime, then every Canadian will be impacted by a friend or family member's mental illness.

Family members, as primary caregivers and key supporters, often do not get recognition for the part that they play in their loved ones' recovery. Yet families play a significant role in system navigation, providing crisis intervention, assisting with activities of daily living, and advocating on behalf of their relative. This role is not without cost: family members have demonstrated increased rates of anxiety and decreased workplace productivity associated with their caregiving role and often bear substantial economic and social costs.

The Schizophrenia Society of Ontario therefore strongly supports expansion of Employment Insurance (EI) benefits to provide financial assistance for caregivers. The SSO is concerned, however, that caregivers involved in care for their loved ones with a mental illness will not be able to access such financial supports through the newly proposed Special Benefit for parents of critically ill children due to narrow eligibility criteria which would rarely apply to this group of caregivers.

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The Schizophrenia Society of Ontario therefore strongly encourages your government to expand this benefit to include all caregivers and ensure that eligibility criteria do not exclude people with mental illnesses and their caregivers. We are happy to work with your government and share our expertise in this area as this special benefit is developed further.

If you have any questions or would like more information, please do not hesitate to contact Irina Sytcheva, Manager of Policy and Community Relations, at isytcheva@schizophrenia.on.ca or (416) 449-6830 x255.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Mary Alberti'.

Mary Alberti
Chief Executive Officer
Schizophrenia Society of Ontario

Cc: The Honourable Diane Finley, Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development
The Honourable Lisa Raitt, Minister of Labour