

Key messages - Next steps for recommending changes to the *Employment Insurance Program*

Response to the theme for the first annual National Multiple Births Awareness Day (NMBAD), *a call to dialogue on Employment Insurance (EI)*, has been overwhelming! While we had hoped that all the preparations would pay off on May 28th, 2005 and that Canadians and the media would stand up and take notice, the overall reaction to our joint efforts from coast-to-coast made the day wildly successful.

This year's theme focused on the maternity, parental and compassionate care leave provisions under the federal government's *Employment Insurance Program*. Particular efforts were made to draw people's attention to the inadequacy of the current provisions to provide sufficient support to multiple-birth families. We believe this to be the case for three main reasons:

- i) Parents of multiples face extraordinary financial, physical and emotional stress when taking care of two, three or more babies at one time compared to families with singletons.
- ii) Multiple-birth children themselves may face certain challenges: coping with loss of co-multiple, living with special needs, and increased likelihood of identifying and dealing with developmental delays.
- iii) Multiple-birth children must be regarded as individuals in their own right, not as a unit – governments must make changes to programs and policies that perpetuate stereotypes and that assume common needs for multiple-birth children, resulting in programming that is ineffective.

The multiple birth vs. singleton experience is not the same; yet the provisions under current EI policy and programming do not address these differences. Our key recommendations can be grouped into four categories:

- i) **General:** Coverage of only 55% of earnings (up to a certain ceiling) is not adequate. Additionally, current eligibility criteria are too restrictive, and they shut out too many multiple-birth families.
- ii) **Compassionate care leave:** Recommend expanding eligibility criteria to include incidents of preterm birth, low birth weight, or children suffering from anomalies (e.g. cleft palate/lip), and recommend extending the period of leave currently available.
- iii) **Maternity leave:** Recommend allowing mothers to continue benefits under 'sickness' for the full 15 weeks despite the birth of her children when her health warrants special care.
- iv) **Parental leave:** Recommend extending the amount of leave for all incidences of multiple-births to an additional 35 weeks parental leave per newborn, or an extension similar to precedents in these policies set in other countries, such as in Sweden, where an extra six months of leave per child is in effect.

The celebration of National Multiple Births Awareness Day was an opportunity to unite and express our views to the federal government on *EI*. By simultaneously connecting the multiple-birth community in Canada in a common cause, this event increased awareness of the particular issues and challenges faced by our community. Specifically, our call to dialogue has successfully created interest in our demands and has brought international precedents out of the shadows, helping us to identify where we need to focus our efforts in order to pursue improvements to the program.

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Next steps:

We have had many questions from members regarding next steps. Members of the board have engaged with elected officials, particularly with the MP for Nipissing/Timiskaming, Anthony Rota, and are seeking a face-to-face meeting with Ms. Belinda Stronach, the Minister responsible for *EI*, (department of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada) in the fall.

Additionally, we would recommend that you take action in your community, whether through your local chapter events, or through bigger NMBAD events in future years. Here are some suggestions:

- Make your views and experiences known to the media when they are covering chapter events in your area, be it your summer picnic, your fall sale, or even your coffee/play groups; refer any interested parties to your chapter, the MBC website, and to the resources there on MBC's advocacy work.
- As chapters and as individuals, write letters to your MPs, and to the Honourable Belinda Stronach, Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (House of Commons, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0A6, or stonach.b@parl.gc.ca). Tell the story of your experience with *Employment Insurance*, and state your support for the extension of provisions to EI (you can mention MBC's work here if you like).
- Make your views known to your MBC chapter representatives or directly to the MBC board. Tell us how you feel the organization should move forward with this initiative, and whether you support the recommendations developed to date.

Let's ride this wave by continuing to raise awareness in Canada on this issue, and by lobbying for change to this national program – a program that is supposed to reflect the needs of all Canadians, including multiple-birth families!

If you have any questions or suggestions, or you would like to get involved in advocacy work for MBC, please don't hesitate to contact me at: cherylw@multiplebirthscanada.org.

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