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Ms. Kimberley Weatherall
Chair of the Board of Directors
Multiple Births Canada
P.O. Box 432
Wasaga Beach, Ontario
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Dear Ms. Weatherall:

Thank you for your letter of May 5, 2005, addressed to my predecessor, the Honourable Lucienne Robillard, expressing your organization's concerns regarding the Employment Insurance (EI) program, especially on parenting and child rearing.

I appreciate receiving views on Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) programs and how Canadians feel they can be improved. Please be assured that departmental officials are committed to serve clients in a fair and effective manner. This is why, over the years, HRSDC programs have evolved to meet the changing needs of Canadians and to adapt to the economy.

It is worth noting that, on December 31, 2000, benefits for biological or adoptive parents were expanded when a child was born or placed in their care for the purpose of adoption. The modifications were intended to provide Canadians with income support while they are off-work and job protection when they return to work after maternity or parental leave. The amendments were:

- duration of parental benefits being increased from 10 to 35 weeks;
- flexibility being enhanced by permitting parents sharing benefits to serve only one two-week waiting period;
- flexibility also being improved by allowing parents to earn the greater of \$50 or 25 percent of their weekly parental benefits without losing benefit dollar for dollar; and,
- accessibility being improved by reducing the admittance requirement for all special benefits from 700 to 600 hours of insurable employment.

Subsequent to these changes, the number of parents staying home with newborn children in their first year of life increased significantly; reinforcing the Government of Canada's commitment to support children and families.

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The government has recently announced enhancements to the program that are responsive to the recommendations brought forward by various stakeholders. The new measures include one pilot project in regions with unemployment rates of 10 percent or higher, which will test the labour market impact of increasing the working-while-on-claim threshold to allow individuals to earn the greater of \$75 or 40 percent of benefits in an effort to encourage people to take work without a reduction in their benefits.

I have noted your suggestion to extend maternity and parental leave for all incidences of multiple births to one year per newborn. I wish to explain that the *Employment Insurance Act* specifically limits the payment for these benefits regardless of whether more than one child is born or adopted. I also wish to clarify that since EI is an insured-based temporary income plan financed by employers' and employees' premiums replacing only one income, paying more weeks of benefits for multiple births would go beyond the scope of the program.

The Family Supplement is another EI amendment that provides additional benefits to low-income families with children by increasing their benefits rate. The Supplement, which increases benefits from the 55 percent of average weekly insured earnings generally paid to EI clients to up to 80 percent of insured weekly earnings for unemployed parents, takes into account the family income and the number and ages of the children for which the claimant or his or her cohabiting spouse or common-law partner receives a child benefit. To qualify for the Supplement, applicants must have at least one dependent child and have a net family income of \$25,921 or less. The Government of Canada also provides assistance to multiple birth parents through the Canada Child Tax Benefit.

In your correspondence you refer to working families faced with medical crises. Perhaps you will be pleased to know that six weeks of Compassionate Care benefits (CCB), along with eight weeks of job protection under the *Canada Labour Code*, have been made available to eligible employees since January 4, 2004. This initiative ensures that eligible clients are able to take a temporary absence from work when a parent, spouse or child falls gravely ill and is at significant risk of death, without fear of sudden income or job loss.

The maximum six-week benefits for CCB were based on a variety of factors, including medical evidence on the duration of severe illnesses and best practices in the public and private sectors. Research indicates that 72 percent of Canadians who take time off-work to care for a family member take less than six weeks. The Government of Canada assessed the evidence and determined that six weeks of benefits within a 26 week period, when a seriously ill family member has a significant risk of death, represents a balanced approach that meets the needs of Canadians and establishes a sound foundation for compassionate care benefits.

While you suggest that CCB should be amended to read critically ill, it must be emphasized that EI is designed to provide temporary income support. Labour force absences to care for critically ill persons may not be temporary because of the longer-term nature of the illnesses. Longer-term aid required by the family caregivers of critically ill Canadians are administered by tax credits, or through services and supports provided by provincial governments. A critical illness situation may become a short-term health crisis when there is a risk of death for a parent, spouse or child. In such cases, CCB may be available to a family member to assist in dealing with the crisis situation.

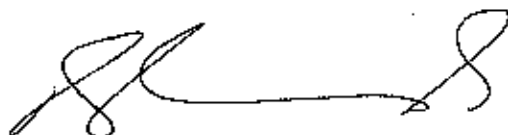
It has been the department's intention to evaluate the CCB and, following an assessment, to consider possible improvements and changes. It is worth noting that conclusions and potential solutions of government programs must be based upon careful analysis of program evaluation's data.

Please be assured that departmental officials have been monitoring the Compassionate Care program as data became available, and have found indications that early program adjustments may be warranted. In view of this, a policy review of preliminary data that will consider a number of issues, including the range of family relationships currently recognized under the benefit, is now underway. This analysis will guide decisions on whether program adjustments should be made earlier than allowed by the timeframe of a full evaluation.

In closing, I appreciate proposals such as yours as they help identify areas where improvements can be made in the interest of providing better service for Canadians. I can assure you that your suggestions will be considered at their full merit in future changes to the EI program.

I hope that this has been helpful in addressing your concerns, and that it will also assist you in understanding the department's position on these matters. Thank you again for writing.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Belinda Stronach', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Belinda Stronach