

MPP, ministry a perfect match; Bountrogianni a veteran of children's issues - Advocates watching Liberal budget moves [CA-ON]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

One of the first promises Dalton McGuinty made to the people of Ontario while in opposition was that he would create a ministry dedicated solely to the needs of the province's children.

It took two elections and almost five years for McGuinty to be in a position to keep that promise and appoint Marie Bountrogianni as the minister of children's services when he named his first cabinet following the Liberal election victory in October.

Bountrogianni was first elected as the Liberal MPP for Hamilton Mountain in 1999, just two months after the Liberals released their comprehensive "First Steps" program aimed at creating a one-stop- shopping ministry to meet the needs of the province's children.

The new MPP's resume was a dream come true for many of the people advocating for better services for children.

Bountrogianni, who has a Ph.D. in psychology, was chief psychologist for the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board and an assistant professor at McMaster University before entering politics.

On the day she was named to McGuinty's cabinet, Bountrogianni beamed with excitement and told reporters, "I feel like I've prepared all my life for this."

She says the broad mandate of her ministry - to improve the lives of children - is a challenge that she is up to and vows that no one area will take precedence in her mind.

"I used to own and run a day-care centre, I have two degrees in early childhood education, I used be a chief psychologist with a school board, so mental health excites me," she says.

"It's also a major challenge, but it's very interesting and I have a good vision of what I want to do with that."

Before working as a psychologist, for five years Bountrogianni ran the Hamilton day-care centre that was started by her mother. Her parents immigrated to Canada from Greece in 1955 and both worked in small business.

When Tuesday's budget is unveiled by Finance Minister Greg Sorbara, more than \$3 billion is expected to be formally transferred to the children's ministry from a variety of other sources, including community and social services, education, correctional services and health.

Bountrogianni says setting up a new ministry from scratch without an established bureaucracy and budget has required patience not only on her part, but on the part of the people who work with children and who are looking for results.

One of the first issues she had to defend as a minister was the move by the Liberals to put 16- and 17-year-old young offenders under her ministry's jurisdiction, taking them away from the corrections ministry. Before the creation of the children's ministry, young offenders aged 13 to 15 were overseen by the social services ministry.

Bountrogianni says bringing all young offenders under her purview makes sense, even though her critics have lined up against the move.

In listing accomplishments in her first months on the job, the minister also points to the province's move to pass \$9 million in federal child-care funds along to day-care centres that were in danger of closing because of maintenance and building code requirements.

"For the first time in a decade, we gave federal money for child care to child care," she says, promising that there is more to come in the budget.

Kira Heineck, executive director of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, says the group is very positive about Bountrogianni's appointment and has high hopes that the Liberals will fulfil their election promise to boost funding for licensed child care as part of their commitment to early learning.

"We were very happy to see the creation of the new ministry as we see it as a good indication that the new government will be advocating for children and improved services," says Heineck, adding that all eyes are on Tuesday's budget.

Heineck says the Liberals have vowed to put an end to the Tory policy of spending federal early learning grants for children on anything but child care.

But Bountrogianni warns that the creation of the new ministry does not automatically mean that every program the Liberals inherited from the Tories will have its funding cut in favour of regulated child care.

"I don't want to just take something away. That would be easy. I have to look at what works and what doesn't work," she says of a province-wide review that is underway.

One of the most contentious issues handed to Bountrogianni was the case of autistic children who are denied intensive therapy after the age of 6, leaving parents to pick up bills that run as high as \$50,000 a year.

In March, the minister announced that while she was doubling the amount of provincial money spent on autism to \$80 million, the policy that cuts the therapy off at age 6 would continue. Bountrogianni said she based her decision on scientific evidence that suggests those children are best cared for in the school system where they learn essential social skills.

The move came despite a clear promise from McGuinty during the election campaign to lift the age cut-off that parents of autistic children have called arbitrary and has raised the ire of her critics.

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