

April 16, 2013

Ref: 179292

Robert Dalton
Executive Director
Opticians Association of Canada
2706-83 Garry St
Winnipeg MB R3C 4J9

Dear Mr. Dalton:

I am following up on your April 9, 2013, meeting with Minister of Social Development, Moira Stilwell, which I participated in by phone. I appreciate the time you and your colleagues took to meet with the Minister regarding the Ministry of Social Development's pilot program for the online retailing of eye-care products.

British Columbia's BC Employment and Assistance (BCEA) program provides coverage for prescription eyewear to eligible clients on income and disability assistance. Clients are free to shop for eyewear where they choose.

Online eyewear became available in British Columbia subsequent to regulatory changes to the *Health Professions Act* in 2010. Recognizing that more and more British Columbians are choosing to purchase their eyewear online, ministry staff have been reviewing our policies to ensure that we are providing options to clients consistent with services otherwise available to British Columbians. This is not to minimize the excellent service being provided by storefront eyewear providers in our province. Online shopping may be advantageous for certain clients who have some difficulty accessing storefront services. Online shopping can also reduce clients' travel and transportation costs. While not likely to become a primary means of providing service, the availability of online eyewear may effectively serve some on our income assistance caseload. The ministry has, therefore, developed a pilot project to assess client response.

In response to your three questions:

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1. What are you trying to achieve?

- The ministry takes the health and well-being of clients seriously, and has approached the development of this online pilot in a prudent and measured way.
- At the same time and, in keeping with shifting trends for all British Columbians, we want to learn how greater choice and convenience can be afforded to ministry clients through online provision of services.
- Our intent is not to minimize or undermine the excellent service being provided by Eye Care Professionals (ECPs) but rather to complement those existing services by providing another option.
- It is recognized that this online alternative will not suit all ministry clients. Many will prefer instead to access the services and support offered by ECPs at storefront suppliers.
- The objective is to learn how we can enhance service and expand options for our clients. For some ministry clients, particularly those with disabilities or dealing with other accessibility barriers, online service delivery may not only prove convenient, it may afford other practical and financial benefits.
- Observations gathered through the course of the pilot will be used to inform future policy development as may be necessary.
- If successful, the intent is to enable expansion to include other online eyewear companies in the future, providing they meet government criteria to be registered to serve ministry clients.

2. Prescription, verification, adjustment and follow-up care.

- Ministry policies concerning eye examinations and provision of basic eyeglasses are remaining unchanged for the purposes of this pilot. The existing fee schedule will apply and clients will be expected to provide information from a valid prescription.
- Prior to commencing the pilot, the ministry determined the initial online provider participating in the pilot meets current program policy and criteria, including having a credentialed professional on staff.
- Recognizing the importance of ensuring the efficacy and safety of the process and the eyewear product, ministry staff also visited the provider's manufacturing processes, facilities and reviewed their quality-assurance measures.

3. What is peripheral ECP support?

- Inevitably, fitting and repair issues will arise. The initial online provider has delivery and return policies in place to deal with these. Therefore, we do not foresee a need for after-care services on the part of peripheral ECPs or unaffiliated storefront operators.
- The ministry would anticipate the ECP's response to being presented with eyewear purchased through this pilot project to be the same as that associated with eyewear that was purchased from any competitor.
- This will be an area we will monitor during the pilot.

Thank you again for your enquiry. I look forward to sharing the results of the pilot with you in the fall.

Sincerely,



Mark Sieben
Deputy Minister
Minister of Social Development