

Dear Ms. McEachern:

Thank you for your letter dated February 18, 2013, regarding the Ministry of Social Development's pilot program for the online retailing of eye care products.

I appreciate your taking the time to share your comments and concerns.

British Columbia's BC Employment and Assistance (BCEA) program provides coverage for prescription eyewear to all clients on income and disability assistance when these are dispensed by an optician, optometrist or ophthalmologist. Clients are free to shop for eyewear where they choose. As you have noted, various suppliers are very good at accommodating BCEA program clients and often match ministry rates for eyewear.

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 various options and the right supports and services to clients. This is not to minimize the excellent service being provided by storefront eyewear providers. Instead, the ministry is looking into providing an alternative for certain clients, especially those who have some difficulty accessing storefront services. Online shopping can also reduce clients' travel and transportation costs.

Final preparations are being made for the pilot project to test online optical services delivery for income assistance clients in the province. Ministry officials have also reviewed online optical service delivery models in other jurisdictions. The exact details of the pilot program launch and duration will be posted as soon as available.

The ministry has identified Clearly Contacts as a service provider for the pilot project, as the company has the credentialed

professional on staff as required by regulation and is able to meet other criteria, such as appropriate licensing to do business in the province. The company also met ministry requirements with regard to manufacturing processes, facilities and quality assurance measures. Clearly Contacts has excellent delivery and return policies, so we do not foresee a need for after-care services on the part of storefront operators.

This is a pilot project, intended to identify the benefits of this new service option, and areas that need improvement. To mitigate possible fraud and reduce errors, the ministry has been working closely with Pacific Blue Cross, our contracted service-delivery partner, to develop business processes and mechanisms for verifying client eligibility for provincially-funded eyewear. Pacific Blue Cross will be reviewing the prescription information provided by ministry clients and verifying prescribers' credentials.

The ministry takes the health and well-being of clients seriously, and is approaching this online pilot with prudence. Information gained from the pilot project will help the ministry and its partner organizations in planning any future expansion of online offerings. If the program is expanded, other online eyewear companies will have the opportunity to participate as suppliers, provided they meet government criteria for providing services.

Thank you again for sharing your concerns. As we undertake this project, we value input and feedback from clients, optometrists, eyewear retailers and the general public.

Sincerely,

Moira Stilwell, M.D.
Minister of Social Development