



## With Alabama outpacing nation in autism cases, state coordinator seeks more funding for care and support



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MADISON, Alabama -- Alabama is outpacing the rest of the country with the fastest growing developmental disability in the United States, and the state autism director said Alabama needs to step up its spending to help families manage the growing challenge.

Alabama saw a 517 percent increase in Autism Spectrum Disorder cases in residents aged 3 to 21 from the year 2000 to 2010, which was ahead of the national increase of 448 percent. Nationwide, one in 88 children have autism. There are 100 autistic students in Madison City Schools.

Each of those families spends an average of \$60,000 a year caring for a child or adult with autism, according to [autismspeaks.org](http://autismspeaks.org).

The good news is Alabama has strong grassroots support to build a lifelong system of care and support for people with ASD and their families, said Anna McConnell, state autism coordinator for the Alabama Department of Mental Health.

McConnell was at Harvest Elementary School in Madison on Monday night and shared with 15 parents from four school systems the progress the state has made in helping families challenged by autism as well as obstacles that remain.

"We're definitely ahead on partnerships and having a collaborative effort," she said. "All the agencies are on board, and they showed up and participated."

In addition, volunteers are well organized and sharing valuable information with each other, building a logistical support network, McConnell said. They also have created an organized voice that has the ear of the state Legislature.

"Legislators have said they've never seen a group that organized," she said.

With a firm foundation in place, the next step is to start building that lifelong system of support, McConnell said, and that means more money. Essentially, the only money the state has allocated for autism support pays the salary for the state coordinator.

The blueprint for a lifelong support system calls for a base infrastructure of services that provides needs assessment, develops policies, coordinates statewide efforts, monitors for quality assurance and provides essential information to families.

Building on that, the state would form population-based services, such as developmental surveillance programs to ensure people with autism are progressing, as well as offer early intervention and better oral health programs. The next level would provide enabling services, such as respite, transportation and insurance coordination. The top level of support would offer direct services, such as speech, occupational and behavioral therapies.

There are parts of each level being developed already, McConnell said, and she mentioned autism support advocates are lobbying the largest employers in the state to voluntarily add autism care costs to insurance programs. Also, she said she is optimistic the Legislature this year will create a licensing board to certify behavioral analysts.

Still, considering the financial challenges the state and nation already face, it's a victory just to hang on to the funding the state provides and not be cut, McConnell said. But the Legislature has shown real interest in an autism support program, and she encourages supporters to attend the Autism Legislative Day in Montgomery on Feb. 26.

If money were made available, McConnell said her next step would be establishing regional centers around the Alabama to help train and support families.

"I think we could do so much. Many people are willing to help," she said, "but so far everything is a volunteer effort."

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