

Groups Seek to Educate Public during National Autism Awareness Month

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More children will be diagnosed with autism this year than with childhood cancer, juvenile diabetes or pediatric AIDS combined

MONTGOMERY – Governor Robert Bentley has proclaimed April as Autism Awareness Month in Alabama. The Alabama Interagency Autism Coordinating Council and the Autism Society of Alabama are partnering to promote this observance. The month-long awareness campaign held annually in April has been sponsored since the 1970s by the Autism Society of America, and seeks to highlight the growing need for concern and awareness about autism spectrum disorders.

Events will be held statewide celebrating the observance, including a series of Walks for Autism in 15 locations around the state. Proceeds from the walks benefit the Autism Society of Alabama, which also sponsors the walks. In addition, a “Light It Up Blue” campaign will also be going on during April, involving everything from office buildings to people’s front porches.

According to the most recent autism prevalence rate released by the CDC, 1 in 88 children are identified as having an autism spectrum disorder. The prevalence rate increases even more when describing the male population; 1 in 54 boys are identified as having an ASD, which is five times the rate of ASD in girls. When applying statistics to population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau, there are as many as 54,800 Alabamians affected by ASD.

Anna McConnell is Alabama’s autism coordinator and director of the Alabama Interagency Autism Coordinating Council. The AIACC was created to meet the urgent and substantial need to develop and implement a statewide comprehensive, coordinated, multidisciplinary, interagency system of care for individuals with autism spectrum disorders and their families. The lead agency is the Alabama Department of Mental Health.

McConnell was recently selected to serve as an Act Early Ambassador for the CDC’s “**Learn the Signs. Act Early.**” program. She will play an important role in educating Alabama’s parents, healthcare professionals, and early educators about early childhood development, warning signs of autism and other developmental disabilities, and the importance of acting early on concerns about a child’s development. McConnell says, “Supports and services provided to those with ASD allow for greater gains through early identification and treatment, increased opportunities for employment, and a reduced need for as intensive of supports later in life, thereby reducing the associated costs for services. Thoughtful and intentional planning for this population is necessary



Walk for Autism

for the health and quality of life for Alabamians with ASD and their families, as well as for our state as a whole.”

ASDs are a group of developmental disabilities that typically begin before a child is three years old and last throughout their lives. People with ASDs have substantial challenges with social interaction and communication. They handle information in their brain differently than other people and might have unusual ways of learning, paying attention and reacting to different sensations.

Contributed by Anna B. McConnell