

April is National Autism Awareness Month

MONTGOMERY – Governor Robert Bentley is set to declare April as Autism Awareness Month in Alabama. The Alabama Interagency Autism Coordinating Council and the Autism Society of Alabama are partnering to promote National Autism Awareness Month. The month-long campaign held annually in April, sponsored since the 1970s by the Autism Society of America, 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 more than 15 locations around the state. The walks are sponsored by the Autism Society of Alabama, and proceeds benefit ASA, which works to improve the quality of life of persons with ASDs and their families through education, advocacy and support. Also co-hosted by ASA, the 3rd annual HELP Autism/ASD Workshop will be held on April 27 in Huntsville. This one-day training is free to the public, and targeted at parents and professionals. More information about this conference can be found at <http://summerhelp.eventbrite.com/>. A “Light It Up Blue” campaign will also be going on during April, involving everything from office buildings and city centers to people’s front porches.

The Alabama Interagency Autism Coordinating Council is busy addressing some of the state’s most prominent needs regarding ASDs. It also recently welcomed a new director, Anna McConnell. Before being named Alabama’s autism coordinator, McConnell was the program manager for the Autism Society of Alabama. Prior to serving in that position, she served as the project coordinator for the Alabama Autism Needs Assessment Project. McConnell holds a Bachelor of Arts in history from Samford University, a Master of Social Work with an Adults & Families concentration from the University of Alabama, and a Master of Public Health with a concentration in Maternal & Child Health from the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

Workgroups within the AIACC are currently focusing on putting together best-practice and implementation recommendations. A special workgroup focused on early surveillance and screening will soon be kicking off a “Learn the Signs – Act Early” campaign with commercials and information that will be made available to pediatricians, early childcare providers and parents focusing on the early detection of developmental delays. A community services workgroup is also at work putting together resources and information for emergency personnel and compiling a state list of autism resources.

According to McConnell, “Funding for autism is extremely limited. Behavioral therapy is often not covered, and a diagnosis is usually made too late to take full advantage of services. Alabama’s state agencies are joining together through the AIACC to address these pressing and urgent needs.” She shares that anyone interested in being involved in the work of the council can register online at <http://www.autism.alabama.gov/> or email her at anna.mcconnell@mh.alabama.gov.

The Alabama Interagency Autism Coordinating Council 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.

ASDs are a group of developmental disabilities that typically begin before a child is three years of age and last throughout their lives. People with ASDs have substantial challenges in 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. The latest report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (released 2012) states that one in every 88 children in the United States has an ASD diagnosis. According to Autism Speaks, more children will be diagnosed with autism this year than with childhood cancer, juvenile diabetes or pediatric AIDS combined.