



Missouri Autism Commission Ready for Important Task

JEFFERSON CITY — The newly formed Missouri Commission on Autism Spectrum Disorders met recently, and I am very pleased with the level of concern, skill, enthusiasm and motivation of this 24-member group in making a difference in the lives of Missouri families affected by Autism-related disorders.

As you may recall, the commission was formed following the passage of Senate Bill 768 that I sponsored and successfully advanced through the General Assembly earlier this year, which also created the Office of Autism Services within the Missouri Department of Mental Health. The measures were recommendations of a statewide Blue Ribbon Panel on Autism formed last year — of which I served as chair — which will enable Missouri to develop a comprehensive, coordinated system of healthcare, education and services for people living with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD).

The blue ribbon panel accomplished a lot, and it is our goal to pass the baton of research, findings and recommendations to the autism commission so that we can continue to move our state forward in reaching its goal of providing the best resources available for diagnosis, treatment and support for Missouri families.

Autism is a national public health crisis, with an estimated 1 in 150 people in the U.S. living with autism-related disorders. An alarming 1 percent of the global population — 67 million — is reportedly affected by this troubling array of biological disorders. In Missouri, recent statistics report 4,679 children with disabilities ages 3-21 received special education services for autism in 2006-2007, up from 1,723 children in 2000.

Missouri continues its efforts to make autism a top priority. During the 2008 legislative session, several bills were introduced regarding autism; including a Senate Bill I sponsored (SB 770) that would have created the Missouri Scholarships for Students with Developmental Disabilities Program. The scholarship program would have allowed students with special needs, in particular students with autism spectrum disorder, to attend a school, public or private, other than the school in their resident school district. Several other bills were also introduced, including ones to mandate health insurance coverage for individuals with autism. In time, I think that will happen. A few years ago, the General Assembly passed the “Mental Health and Chemical

Dependency Insurance Act,” which ensures coverage for autism as defined in the international classification of diseases.

Both nationally and worldwide, more and more attention is thankfully being drawn to autism. In Wisconsin, employers are now looking at ways to improve the lives of adults living with autism spectrum disorders. Parents across the country of children with autism are pushing states to make insurance cover autism therapy, with several states already requiring coverage. Research indicates early diagnosis and intervention help children achieve their maximum potential, so it’s vitally important for families to be able to afford treatment and services. Just recently, members of the international diplomatic community, medical experts, and first ladies from several countries gathered at the United Nations World Focus on Autism in New York. Autism Speaks — an advocacy group that funds research into the causes, treatment and best diagnostic tools for autism — presented the program. The group called on professionals, and society as a whole, to become more involved in the fight against autism.

In Missouri, I’m pleased to report state lawmakers are listening — and responding to — the needs of Missouri families living with ASD and are taking a leadership role in the nation’s campaign to address this timely and critical issue.

If you have comments or questions about this week’s column or any other matter involving state government, please do not hesitate to contact me. You can reach my office by phone at (866) 271-2844.

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