



Gibbons Capitol Report
April 4, 2008

Autism Awareness and Support

Wednesday was World Autism Awareness Day. It's important that as many people as possible learn about autism, the signs that lead to diagnosis, and how early intervention can mean a world of difference in the quality of life of someone with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). There seems to be a tidal wave of the number of children who are now being diagnosed with autism. The Center for Disease Control says that one in 150 children in this country are born with autism, more than AIDS, juvenile diabetes, and pediatric cancer combined.

Foundation to Build On

Missouri first began services for individuals with ASD in the early 1970s. In 1991, the first regional Parent Advisory Council was formed and grew into the Missouri Autism Project that now encompasses every county in Missouri. With the Project in place, community provider Judevine built a network to help families and individuals who live with autism. In recent years, Missouri has been taking some aggressive steps thanks to the input of dedicated advocates. Last year, the Legislature more than doubled funding for autism diagnosis and treatment, helping reduce the waitlist for services with more than \$3.9 million. This year, we've locked in a \$7.4 million increase in those services.

The Blue Ribbon Panel

The funding increases we're making are only the first step in our commitment to improve the quality of life for Missourians of all ages living with autism. We want to be a leader in the 21st Century in serving our families facing autism. That's why I created the Blue Ribbon Panel on Autism last year. The 16-person panel consisted of lawmakers, parents, doctors, health officials, and educators and was charged with laying a roadmap on how the state can improve services and empower families living with autism. They heard from hundreds of people in five meetings across the state. Their report was presented in December and can be viewed online at www.senate.mo.gov/autism.

Moving Forward

We vowed to turn the Blue Ribbon Panel's recommendations into reality and that is what we're doing by passing legislation to put the panel's first two recommendations into place. On Autism Awareness Day we passed Senate Bill 768 creating the Missouri Commission on Autism Spectrum Disorders that will advise government on how to implement the best practice models from the ideas presented to us by the Blue Ribbon Panel. We also

authorized in statute the Office of Autism Services. The office will serve as an entry point to help direct families to diagnosis and care services, making it easier to navigate the system and more quickly find the resources they need.

Autism manifests differently in every individual diagnosed. And, unfortunately, there is no medical detection or cure. So we must be ready to help. That is why we created the Blue Ribbon Panel on Autism and that is why we are taking action on their recommendations. It will take time, but we will be a leader in serving Missourians and their families facing autism.