

3/1/12

Dear Senate Health Policy Committee:

As a former co-president of the Autism Society of Washtenaw County, I urge you to consider supporting autism reform legislation for Michigan. This legislation is vital, as it will allow thousands of Michigan children and families to receive the diagnosis and treatments they need.

I have two boys on the autism spectrum, ages 12 and 15, and we have spent upwards of \$500,000 in the past 12 years providing autism treatments and therapies – therapies that have been shown by research to be effective, but are still being excluded by insurance companies because the diagnosis is autism. We are very fortunate to have been able to afford to provide it, though it has been a monumental financial strain, with me having to give up working and also going through retirement savings, second mortgage, etc. But many families cannot even begin to afford the necessary treatments and therapies. These families don't deserve to have their children's diagnosis of autism discriminated against and excluded specifically from treatment, they deserve a chance to succeed.

Autism affects one in 110 children, according to the Centers for Disease Control, and one in 70 boys. Just six years ago, approximately 10,000 children in Michigan had autism. Today the Michigan Department of Education estimates that autism affects more than 15,000 children. Despite this rapid increase, insurers continue to deny coverage to children with autism. In many cases, insurers already cover required treatments like speech and occupational therapy - but not with a diagnosis of autism. Medically proven treatments for autism are available; in fact, with early intensive intervention (ABA), 47% of children with autism recover "typical" function, and another 40% improve significantly.

Since treatment is not covered by insurance, most children in Michigan with autism do not get the care they need. 2009 & 2011 studies calculates a total savings of **\$14 billion** if Michigan changed our laws to cover diagnosis and treatment of autism. If an individual is able to improve or recover to the point where they can take care of themselves, live independently, and hold a job, the financial savings are huge, and this is not even considering the societal benefit of helping a person realize their full potential.

Insurance coverage for autism will also benefit schools and communities. Each year, Michigan **public schools spend more than \$100 million** to accommodate students with autism. With diagnosis, early intervention, and treatment, special education classes will shrink. Early intervention will allow more children to function independently as they reach adulthood, saving the state an average of \$2 million per child over the life of a child with autism. This will allow many to secure employment and live independently instead of relying on services like job training, Medicaid, and adult day care.

An added benefit to making this change is that **covering autism treatment will bring jobs to Michigan**. The Behavioral Analyst Certification Board estimates that Michigan currently employs only 83 Board Certified Behavioral Analysts. Florida, which requires coverage, has 1,800 behavioral analysts. For all these reasons, 29 states have passed autism insurance reform legislation, often with strong bipartisan support. Leaders across the country are recognizing and correcting the injustice of denying coverage to families and children affected by autism. This legislation passed in the House in 2009 by an overwhelming bipartisan vote but was unable to be voted on by the Senate last year. The bills have been newly introduced in both the House and Senate again in 2011, and now are being seriously considered. A companion bill has been introduced to help share the potential cost savings with the insurers to help mitigate their upfront cost increases.

Please consider supporting autism reform legislation so these necessary changes can be made ASAP. The quality of so many of our children's lives depends on it.

Barbara Byers

