

January 27, 2009

March 31 is Deadline for Autism Screenings

Free autism screenings for children under five are still being offered by the Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) until March 31, 2009, state health officials said Tuesday.

Parents who want their child screened are encouraged to schedule an appointment with **one** of the listed agencies. Contact information for each area of the state is as follows:

- **Western Montana residents should contact the Child Developmental Center.** To schedule an appointment call either the Missoula office at (406) 549-6413, Kalispell office at (406) 755-2425 or call toll-free (800) 914-4779.
- **Central Montana and Billings area residents should contact Full Circle.** To schedule an appointment call either the Great Falls/QLC office at (406) 452-9531 or the Billings/STEP office at (406) 248-2055.
- **Eastern Montana residents should contact the Developmental Educational Assistance Program.** To schedule an appointment call the Miles City office at (406) 234-6034.

The free screenings have been on-going since July 2008 and have helped DPHHS create a list of Montana children under five who have autism. Children added to the list will be considered eligible to receive services from a new Medicaid program now being offered called the Autism Waiver for Children. The program received official approval by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services earlier this month.

So far, over 160 children have been screened and 110 have been determined eligible for the program that has enough funding to provide services for 45 children. The \$2 million a year program includes \$600,000 in state funds with the remaining balance covered by federal dollars.

A random name drawing will select the 45 children who will receive 20-25 hours per week of intensive in-home autism therapy for up to three years by a provider trained in methods that have been proven to be effective for children with autism. Participation in the program is entirely voluntary.

The screenings are being offered to ensure all children included in the selection process for the program will have an up-to-date diagnosis made or confirmed by professionals using consistent evaluation procedures. “Even if a child has already been diagnosed with autism, the child’s parents still need to make contact with one of three contracted agencies in order to have the diagnosis verified and evaluated,” Sturm said.

Children may go through a two hour initial screening and, if needed, some will require further testing in order to produce an accurate diagnosis. “The screening process can be time-consuming so it’s important for parents to make an appointment now in order to meet the March 31 deadline,” Sturm mentioned.

In 2008, DPHHS formed a workgroup to study the autism issue in Montana and to address growing concerns regarding family needs and gaps in the current system of autism services in this state. The workgroup reviewed large amounts of current research and identified the best ways to improve a child’s prospect for their future. “Based on available research, we learned the best way to make a difference in the life of a child with autism is to start them in an intensive program before age five,” Sturm said.

However, Sturm cautions parents that autism has many forms and levels of severity. In other words, even if a child has been diagnosed with autism doesn’t guarantee they’ll qualify for the program. They must first meet specific qualification standards.

A 2007 report from the National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reveals that the incidence of children born with autism is approximately 1 in 150 and that the number of incidents is increasing by an estimated 10 to 17 percent per year with the data collected in 2002.

Also, the National Institute of Mental Health reported autism is the fastest growing developmental disorder and affects more children than those with diabetes, cystic fibrosis, Down Syndrome and cancer combined.

For more information call Sturm at 406-444-2695.

Parents who suspect their child has autism should look for these red flag signs:

- Not play ‘pretend’ games (pretend to ‘feed’ a doll).
- Not point at objects to show interest (point at an airplane flying over).
- Not look at objects when another person points at them.

- Have trouble relating to others or not have an interest in other people at all.
- Avoid eye contact and want to be alone.
- Have trouble understanding other people's feelings or talking about their own feelings.
- Prefer not to be held or cuddled or might cuddle only when they want to.
- Appear unaware when other people talk to them but respond to other sounds.
- Be very interested in people, but not know how to talk to, play with, or relate to them.
- Repeat or echo words or phrases said to them, or repeat words phrases in place of normal language.
- Have trouble expressing their needs using typical words or motions.
- Have trouble adapting to changes in routine.
- Have unusual reactions to the way things smell, taste, look, feel or sound.
- Lose skills they once had (for instance, stop saying words they were once using).

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