

**NEWS FROM THE MONTANA DEPARTMENT
OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES**

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DPHHS to Address Growing Autism Numbers

The Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) will allocate \$2 million to launch an early intervention program for children with autism, state health officials announced Monday.

To address increased autism cases, the Disability Services Division for DPHHS will be working with the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services on an Autism Waiver for Children.

The waiver clears the way for a combination of DPHHS and federal funds to be used to finance the program. The \$2 million allocation includes \$600,000 of state funds and the remaining balance is federal.

The program is expected to be in operation later this year.

Applicants will be evaluated and diagnosed through a screening process. To be eligible for the program, a child must be between 2 and 5 years of age. The service will include 20-25 hours per week of intensive in-home rehabilitation for three years by a trained provider.

“I applaud the hard work by Department staff in developing creative ways to tackle a complex issue,” said Director Joan Miles. “We also appreciate Governor Schweitzer’s concern and support for this issue as we move ahead with this vital project.”

“There is no cure for autism, but studies have shown that placing children in intensive services early in life is a proven treatment strategy,” Governor Brian Schweitzer said. “This method has been successful in other states and I’m elated Montana will soon be offering this service.”

According to Developmental Disabilities Program director Jeff Sturm the program will cover about 40 children with autism at a cost of \$40,000 per year per child.

Sturm said at least 100 children in current developmental disability services in Montana need this type of treatment, but there is probably more that have not been identified.

“There are more children out there than we can serve, but this is a great start in addressing this escalating problem,” he said.

Due to national and state trends showing increased autism cases, Disability Services formed a workgroup last summer to study the issue and to explore what could be done to help in this state. The workgroup included parents of children with autism, advocates, legislators, mental health professionals and others. They looked at current studies and what other states are doing and decided applying for a waiver was the best approach.

One of the most difficult tasks the workgroup faced was deciding who among all eligible applicants will be accepted into the program, Sturm said. It was decided a random selection process will be used and those not selected will be put onto a waiting list. The program will be offered to families throughout the state.

Parents of the children chosen for the program will be asked to play a major role in the treatment process, especially after the three years of treatment end. "The goal is to make parents professionals in the treatment of their children and have the expertise to continue and sustain the child's gains," Sturm added.

Currently, there are eight providers covering all 56 counties who have the capability of delivering this service.

This announcement comes on the heels of a contract the state recently awarded to A.W.A.R.E., Inc. to open a residential group home in Bozeman that will serve four youth affected by autism between the ages of 10 to 16.

A 2007 report from the National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) 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. The cause of autism is unknown.

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