

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

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Contact: Jeff Sturm, Developmental Disabilities Program Director, DPHHS, 406-444-2695

Jon Ebelt, Public Information Officer, DPHHS, 406-444-0936

DPHHS to Screen Children Under Five for Autism

The Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) wants to identify the number of Montana children under five who have autism, state officials said Wednesday.

To help pinpoint that information, DPHHS will spend \$384,000 to offer free autism screenings at various clinics across the state effective immediately.

The effort will create a list of children eligible to receive services for a new Medicaid program called the Autism Waiver for Children Program announced last month.

The selection process for the program will be completed later this year allowing for 40 children to receive intensive in-home autism therapy for up to three years. The costs of this service will vary, but for some children the value of the service could be as much as \$40,000 per child per year.

These services will include 20-25 hours per week of intensive in-home 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.

DPHHS Developmental Disabilities Program director Jeff Sturm urges parents who want their child included in the selection process to make an appointment for a free screening.

“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 added.

The screenings should be completed by November and the initial selection process for the Autism Waiver will take place soon thereafter.

While the program will not be able to serve all children with autism, Sturm is appreciative that available funding will enable DPHHS to serve 40 children.

Sturm said the soon-to-be created database of names will also help demonstrate the real extent of need in the state. “It’s important we come up with an accurate number of children who need this type of in-home autism therapy,” Sturm said. “We know there are

more than forty children who could benefit from in-home therapy, but at this time that's all the funding the waiver can support.”

Based on current data, it's estimated about 100 children in current developmental disability services are eligible for the waiver. However, once all the screening data is compiled Sturm believes that number will be much higher.

The state decided to offer free screening and evaluation for a number of reasons, but mostly to ensure all children included in the selection process for the waiver will have an up-to-date diagnosis made or confirmed by professionals using consistent evaluation procedures.

The Child Developmental Center, Developmental Educational Assistance Program, and Full Circle will offer the screenings. All three clinics have offices in various locations throughout the state and have added staff to meet the expected demand.

Parents who want their child screened should 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.

Children may go through a two hour initial screening and, if needed, some will require further testing in order to produce an accurate diagnosis.

DPHHS formed a workgroup last summer 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.

“The research shows that autism therapy is the most effective if it is very intensive and begins at a young age, specifically age five or younger,” 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 waiver program. They must first meet specific qualification standards.

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).

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.

“Although the cause of autism is unknown, current research shows there are effective evidence-based therapies that show reason for optimism for families whose children live with autism,” Sturm added.

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

Jon Ebelt

Public Information Officer
Montana Dept. of Public Health
and Human Services
P.O. Box 4210
Helena, MT 59602
jebelt@mt.gov
Office: (406) 444-0936
Cell: (406) 461-3757