



## The New Hampshire Council on Autism Spectrum Disorders

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### For Immediate Release

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Some Granite State families who have a child diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder will soon receive additional help thanks to a bill signed by Governor John Lynch late last Friday. HB 569, also known as Connor's Law, requires that private insurance carriers operating under NH regulations must cover treatments that are commonly prescribed by physicians, including speech, occupational, and behavioral therapy.

"This comes as great news on the anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act," said Michelle Jarvis, President of the Autism Society of New Hampshire and mother of Connor, the youngster for whom the bill was named. "All along, our message has been that a child with autism deserves the same level of coverage as a child seeking treatment for any other medical condition. To do any less would not only be poor healthcare policy, it would be discriminatory."

HB 569 aligns coverage with the recommendations of the American Academy of Pediatrics and other professional groups. In the case of behavior-based therapy, also known as "ABA" for "Applied Behavior Analysis," treatment is capped at \$36,000 annually for children birth to 12 years, and \$27,000 annually for children 13 to 21. Coverage for ABA was considered the most controversial aspect of the bill, because behavioral therapy can be costly.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a cluster of neuro-developmental disabilities that impacts an individual's ability to communicate and to interact socially. For reasons that are not known, the incidence of ASD has been increasing in recent decades and is now said to impact one in every 110 children according to the Centers for Disease Control.

Dr. Carl Cooley, developmental pediatrician and chief medical officer of the Crotched Mountain Foundation, called the legislation "a singular achievement on behalf of New Hampshire children with autism and their families. Autism is neurologic condition that is treatable with proven methods supported by research-based evidence," said Cooley. "Just as insurance has always paid for the insulin to treat diabetes and the antibiotics to treat infections, it will now pay for the therapies needed to treat autism."

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Research has shown that 47% of children who receive the recommended level of early treatment will attain a level of skill close to that of their peers by the time they enter kindergarten. Another 40% will make significant gains. "This is really very strong outcome data," said Kirsten Murphy, Director of the NH Council on Autism Spectrum Disorders. "There are many other conditions for which insurance-billable treatments do not reach this level of success, and yet we would certainly never deny coverage."

One of the biggest challenges that advocates faced, said Murphy, was the need to educate legislators about the long term costs associated with a diagnosis of ASD. According to a study by Professor Michael Gantz of the Harvard School of Public Health, the lifetime cost of caring for a person with autism averages \$3.2 million. As much as 90% of those costs lie in adult services and lost productivity during adulthood.

"Treatment is the key to both a better life and to lowering long term societal cost," said Murphy.

The bill's lead sponsor, Suzanne Butcher (D, Keene), was delighted when she heard the news. It has been two years, said Butcher, since the NH Commission on Autism Spectrum Disorders recommended insurance reform, and she and parent advocates began working with the NH Department of Insurance, legislators, and representatives of the insurance industry, over many months of negotiation.

"I am so pleased," Butcher said, "that families and children facing autism will have better access to the coverage and services they need." The bill will be effective January 1, 2011.

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