

ARKANSAS LEGISLATIVE TASK FORCE ON AUTISM
ACT 1272 OF 2009
REPORT TO THE 87TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY

TASK FORCE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Act 1272 of 2009 sponsored by District 32 State Senator David Johnson, District 31 State Senator Mary Anne Salmon and District 88 State Representative Uvalde Lindsey created the Legislative Task Force on Autism. Act 1016 of 2007 sponsored by District 32 State Representative David Johnson created the original task force which presented a final report to the 87th General Assembly addressing five prioritized recommendations based upon the experiences of families and providers who serve Arkansas citizens living with autism spectrum disorder.

With the passage of Act 1272 of 2009, the membership and duties of the Legislative Task Force on Autism were expanded. The membership increased to include more parents of children living with autism spectrum disorder and one elected official appointed by each the President Pro Tempore of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives. The duties were expanded to examine how the State of Arkansas responds to autism and autism spectrum disorder. The task force began meeting in August 2009. At the first meeting, the task force reviewed the 2007 recommendations and resolved to continue building upon the accomplishments.

With the assistance of Governor Mike Beebe, the state Medicaid autism waiver program was created and funded, but is awaiting approval of the federal government. The new autism waiver program is seeking federal approval using \$ 1.5 million dollars from the new tobacco tax revenue. This \$ 1.5 million is used as state matching funds and will provide intensive early intervention services to young children. The creation and funding of the autism waiver program was the number one priority of the 2007 task force to provide statewide access to autism treatment services. Due to the lengthy approval process, the Division of Developmental Disabilities Services of the Department of Human Services authorized the fiscal year 2009-2010 funding to be distributed to families who are providing care to children, siblings or other family members with autism spectrum disorders. This funding was distributed through the same process as the special needs grants and capped annually at \$5,000 per family. After providing documentation that the eligible family member had been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, 355 families received grants under this temporary program.

The second priority of the task force is to decrease the median age of diagnosis for children with Autism in Arkansas. The University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, Arkansas Children's Hospital and Division of Developmental Disabilities Services are working to create community-based screening and evaluation capacity by training and supporting teams of physicians and experienced clinicians statewide. The teams will attempt to eliminate the sixteen month backlog of children waiting for an appointment with one of the two clinics currently offering comprehensive evaluations for children with developmental disabilities.

The third priority of the task force is to remove the existing barriers in accessing and navigating the limited services available within Arkansas. The services provided to families and children living with autism spectrum disorder are divided among different state agencies. This segmentation does have a negative effect on service delivery. The task force chose to focus on the training needs of emergency personnel and first responders in recognizing and responding to the needs of individuals living with autism spectrum disorder. In continuing to use the existing framework of training opportunities, the task force brought together the Law Enforcement Standards and Training Commission, the University of Arkansas's Criminal Justice Institute, the State Police, the Chiefs of Police Association, the Arkansas Sheriff's Association, Association of Public Safety Communications Officers and the National Emergency Number Association. This collaboration was extremely beneficial in determining the law enforcement agencies willingness to assist each other by sharing resources such as expert speakers, training sites and materials. This will not only benefit developmentally disable citizens but will allow the tax dollars appropriated for law enforcement training to reach more officers in the field.

The task force is pleased with the autism waiver program development and future expansion plans to increase the diagnostic services across the state. The progress made in addressing problems that arise from a lack of interagency coordination will benefit the autism community. These programs are vital components of the long term strategy to address the needs of the developmentally disabled community.