

ARKANSAS LEGISLATIVE TASK FORCE ON AUTISM
MEETING MINUTES
OCTOBER 25, 2013

The Arkansas Legislative Task Force on Autism met Friday, October 25, 2013, at 10:00 a.m., in Room 130 of the State Capitol, Little Rock, Arkansas. Senator Uvalde Lindsey and Representative Henry “Hank” Wilkins, IV, presided.

Task Force members present were Senator Uvalde Lindsey, Representative Hank Wilkins, IV, Karan Burnette, Dr. Loretta Cochran, Anna Makogonova (for Dr. Charles Green), Glenda Higgs, Dr. Randal Hundley (for Dr. Michael Martin), Kay Michael, and Dianna Varady.

Advisory members in attendance were Representative Randy Alexander, Dan Honey (for Jay Bradford), Denise Ennett, and Veronica Myers. Also in attendance was Pam Marshall.

Senator Lindsey called the meeting to order. The minutes from the September 20, 2013, Autism meeting were approved by acclamation.

PowerPoint Presentation on Avery’s Project

Avery Downum is nine years old and was diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome in 2011. He gave a PowerPoint presentation on how he began a local movement called “Avery’s Project”. Avery said he spreads autism awareness by passing out bottles of candy with information regarding autism. He has a television project called “Let’s Talk About Autism”. Avery explained the challenges of living with Aspergers, a form of autism. As a walking ambassador of autism, his goal is to inform parents, teachers, and kids about the true facts of autism. Avery will be working on a children’s book named “Eck the goldfish”, which is a story about fictional animals with autistic characteristics. Avery said he works hard in school. He wants to go to college and become a zoo keeper and he will not let autism stop his ambitions. Avery has a face book page with over 1,200 followers. He enjoys Karate, Cub Scouts, and learning about animals. Avery’s mother, Rachel Downum, explained how she felt after receiving Avery’s diagnosis. She said as a parent of a child with autism, you feel your dreams have diminished. But, she said, Avery’s diagnosis has allowed her to develop newer and bigger dreams with purpose and is now glad to be on this journey with Avery.

Evidence –Based Classroom Strategies Subcommittee Report

The Subcommittee’s mission statement: *Develop a plan on how to create a regional network structure with sufficient capacity to insure that all children with autism are receiving evidenced based practices during their school day with fidelity throughout their early childhood and k-12 educational experience; and to develop associated cost estimates for implementation.*

Senator Lindsey explained the subcommittee’s goal is the evidence-based strategies process.

Education Outreach to Underserved Minority Subcommittee Report

The Subcommittee’s mission statement: *To discuss what parents and stakeholders would like to see as outcomes for children with autism and special needs, identify data for outcomes, and to legislate incentives to schools who accomplish those outcomes.*

Karan Burnette explained how the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) “Learn the Signs. Act Early” program is a campaign designed to promote awareness of healthy development in early childhood and provide information regarding support and early intervention services to families across the state who may have a child with a developmental delay. The program funded a hotline number for families to talk to someone

qualified about how to access services. Materials are available in English and Spanish and some are available in other languages as an effort to reach all population groups. The hotline number is also included in the materials.

The subcommittee group discussed asking churches, community health clinics, obstetricians, and gynecologist to help disseminate “Act Early” materials to families who may not be aware of the services that are available. Once the “Act Early” brochures are printed, they may be distributed throughout strategic locations where families are more likely to access the materials. Ms. Burnette explained there are free Saturday one-day workshops that provide information regarding Autism and Asperger’s to groups who are interested in learning about developmental disorders.

Ms. Burnette noted that the College of Education and Health Professions at the University of Arkansas Fayetteville partnered with the Arkansas Department of Education and numerous state agencies to receive a \$32 million, five-year federal grant to fund Promoting Readiness of Minors in Supplemental Security Income (PROMISE), aimed at improving the education and career outcome of low-income Arkansas teenagers between fourteen and sixteen years of age who have a disability and receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI). Their goal is to provide youth with job coaching and benefits counseling. University researchers will gather data on the participants over the five-year course. The focus of the project will be to develop a model program to assist adolescents with disabilities to become independent adults. The hope is that placing students in jobs and better communication among agencies that serve such youths could, in time, reduce the need for SSI checks.

Ms. Varady noted that Partners for Inclusive Communities “Welcome the Children” workshop provides a free professional development all-day training on autism including other developmental disabilities for teachers and early childhood professionals.

Building Statewide Capacity for Delivery of Educational Services Subcommittee

The Subcommittee’s mission statement: *To address why clinics lack adequate behavioral health professionals such as psychologists and psychiatrists who are competent to treat individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities.*

Karan Burnette explained the University of Arkansas Fayetteville received a grant to fund a resource center at the campus for families seeking developmental services for their children. Funding will be used to produce brochures listing key milestone parents can watch for as their child progresses through the early stages of development. Also in the brochure is a hotline phone number for families to call with concerns about their child’s development. Families will be able to talk to a professional in a consistent, effective manner. Through the University’s College of Education and Health Professions, the resource center will provide on-site training for college students seeking a graduate certificate in autism spectrum disorders.

Ms. Cochran feels universities across the state have the infrastructure on their campus to provide a resource center for families needing developmental services. The resource center could be integrated through the University’s College of Education program.

Next meeting date sent tentatively for Friday, November 15, 2013, at 1:00 p.m. in Committee Room 151.

Meeting adjourned at 11:30 a.m.