

Alabama Interagency Autism Coordinating Council
Monday, October 26th, 2009
Alabama Institute for Training and Development

The Alabama Interagency Autism Coordinating Council met on Monday, October 26th, 2009 at the Alabama Institute for Training and Development (AIDT). The meeting was called to order by the Chairman, Representative Cam Ward. Representative Ward thanked everyone in attendance for meeting at the new location and commented on the more convenient parking available, as well as the more spacious accommodations.

Representative Ward welcomed and introduced two new appointments to the council, and two re-appointments. The two re-appointments are Evan Krchak and Dr. Sandra King Parker. The two new appointments are Julie Brown, Parent, and Dr. Swingle, Provider.

Dr. Caroline Gomez performed roll call. The Autism Council members in attendance are as follows: Representative Cam Ward, Dr. Fred Biasini, Cary Boswell, Sue Berry on behalf of Nancy Buckner, Tonya Trim on behalf of Dr. Marquita Davis, Jerimie Goike, John Houston, Elmyra Jones, Melanie Jones, Evan Lang Krchak, Bama Hager, Dalee Chambers on behalf of Dr. Joe Morton, Dr. Sandra King Parker, Sandy Powell on behalf of Dr. Don Williamson, Kay Melnick on behalf of Carol Steckel, Dr. Hanes Swingle, Robert Turner on behalf of Jim Ridling, Tracy Cron on behalf of Linda Bachus, Tristan Dunn and Kathy Welch.

Representative Ward then introduced Commissioner John Houston of the Alabama Department of Mental Health who conveyed his personal interest and that of the Department in this important initiative and referred to the significant steps that have been made, much credit for that going to Representative Ward. The Commissioner also expressed his delight in the fact that Dr. Gomez has joined the department, and feels confident she is the right person for the job.

The minutes from the July 22, 2009 meeting were presented. Alice Widgeon suggested adding the title National Autism Policy Collaborative to the description "leaders from Pennsylvania", as well as making it clear that Jennifer Sellars was unable to be present at that meeting. A motion was made by Commissioner Houston to approve the minutes with the above amendments and seconded. With no opposition, the minutes were adopted. Representative Ward mentioned the minutes would be available on-line at his website, as well as the Autism Alabama website.

Representative Ward then thanked everyone again for coming out to the meeting. He then spoke briefly about the current funding challenge that is being faced by Alabama, stating it is one of the worst in the last six decades. Based on this atmosphere, he stated the Council will have to be more creative in the work done and the programs developed. He further stated even though the challenge is great, it is also a great honor to work with the many great minds that have been assembled on this council, which he credited to Dr. Gomez.

Dr. Caroline Gomez, State Autism Coordinator went over the documents in the handouts. Her opening comments included some of the opportunities she has had since becoming a part of this work, including speaking to the Alabama Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics Open Forum on Autism as well as reviewing other states, and the advances they've made, so lessons can be learned from the initiatives they have put in place.

Dr. Gomez shared the Alabama Autism Legislative Initiative Timeline. The main reason for sharing this information is to show how much work has already been done, starting in 2007 when the Autism Task Force was formed, through October 2009, when the Alabama Interagency Autism Coordinating Council (AIACC) Bylaws were passed. Dr. Gomez asked for anyone with any suggestions for changes or additions to please contact her.

She also provided information on a Draft Plan of Action which provides a basic outline of how the process of establishing Regional Autism Centers might unfold. The groundwork for this was laid by the Task Force. Steps include establishing a Strategic Planning Committee, a Standards of Practice Committee, an Administrative Policy Committee and Implementation. Part of this process can go on simultaneously as avenues for funding are pursued. Regional centers can be established in phases, making the process more manageable.

Representative Ward then moved on to the Committee Report. Alice Widgeon gave a summary from the last meeting that the bylaws were to be sent out for feedback from all the members and stakeholders, resulting in a second draft which was also shared with member agencies. Ms. Widgeon shared there had been no changes to that document and the Committee is pleased to present the Bylaws for adoption. Ms. Widgeon moved that the Bylaws be accepted and the motion was seconded by Ms. Kathy Welch of Easter Seals, Central Alabama. With no opposition, the bylaws were adopted.

Moving on to new business, Representative Ward appointed Dr. Bama Folsom Hager to Chair the Strategic Planning Committee. He cited her previous excellent work with the Healthcare Subcommittee on the Autism Task Force as reason to believe she will do a great job in this process. Dr. Hager asked for clarification that the Strategic Planning Committee would be specific to the Regional Centers, rather than for the council as a whole. Dr. Gomez verified that it is specific to the Regional Center.

Dr. Gomez, referring to the Draft Plan of Action, added a comment that the Other Initiatives listed are items that don't necessarily have to be implemented through a regional center, for instance, the website which is a work in progress that has already started. These initiatives will be worked on separately from the Regional Centers.

Dr. Hager then shared with the Council, on behalf of the Autism Society and Glenwood - Mitchell's Place, regarding the recent collaboration between the Autism Society, Glenwood - Mitchell's Place and McWane Science Center to offer an Autism Family

Night which drew a crowd of approximately 470 people. Out of this, is growing collaboration where these entities are going to attempt to receive a grant to establish a permanent exhibit similar to a Snoezelen sensory room specifically to accommodate people in the state of Alabama with ASD. Melanie Jones elaborates on Snoezelen stimulation as a relaxation technique for persons with developmental disorders. A guest at the meeting volunteered that she attended the McWane exhibit with her family and how impressed she was with the experience. Representative Ward shared there will be another of these exhibits on April 13th, 2010. Information about these events will be posted on the Autism Society website.

In the area of Programs, Dr. Laura Klinger of the University of Alabama shared a presentation on their Autism Disorders Research Clinic. They are heavily involved in research, including evaluating the effectiveness of their College Transition Program. Primarily Dr. Klinger wanted to talk to the group about the new grant they are just starting, the West Alabama Autism Outreach Clinic. This clinic is funded by HRSA (the Health Resources and Services Administration). The program just began last month, and is brand new. The goal for this grant is to meet the needs of individuals with ASD and their families, particularly targeting the West Alabama Region. Obstacles faced in this area are poverty, lack of physicians, and transportation issues. The grant is funded for two years, so all personnel costs for that period will be covered. However, after that, some of the service delivery components will need to begin making their own money. The goals of the program are to increase the availability of inter-disciplinary services in West Alabama, to increase Autism-specific training for current and future professionals and also to increase research to facilitate evidence based practice in the state. They will also be making use of Telemedicine, starting at two sites, Monroeville and Carrollton. Dr. Klinger expressed her concern of using this technology to diagnose Autism, but is anxious to see how it works. In terms of research, they will be creating a larger research database and the participant registry for families.

Representative Ward then introduced DaLee Chambers with the Alabama Department of Education who shared, on behalf of Dr. Mabrey Whetstone, information on the research, development and design of the department's website dedicated to helping teachers and parents and other service providers understand more about how to provide services to children and adults with Autism. The results of this research led to the website located at www.alex.state.al.us/autismAL. This site serves as a portal to many resources that will be helpful to parents, as well as teachers and other stakeholders who desire more information about ASD. In answer to a question, Ms. Chambers verified that this information was also disseminated to the school systems so that all teachers would be notified, through the Special Education Coordinators. The site can also be accessed through the Education website at www.alsde.edu.

Representative Ward thanked the Department of Education for taking the lead and developing such a great website. Representative Ward then introduced Dr. Elizabeth Griffith and Dr. Sarah O'Kelley from UAB's Civitan Sparks Clinic.

Ms. Griffith began by explaining that the Sparks Clinic has several different components, including a direct clinical service component, training, research, and are also actively involved in outreach in the community. While UAB as a whole is involved in a broad spectrum of research, at the Sparks Clinic, they tend to do primarily applied research. Their services include a set of specialty tertiary care clinics. In addition to Autism, they see children for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Developmental Delays, Speech Problems, and Genetic Disorders. They perform state of the science evidence based evaluations.

As far as Autism specific services go, they have clinic based services, diagnostic evaluations, and a toddler preschool clinic in addition to the school age clinic. They do outpatient therapy for individuals with ASD as well as family-based therapies. The medical director is a Psychiatrist who specializes in ASD, and provides psychiatric consults and follow-up for people who want it. They also have community-based services.

Dr. O'Kelley shared that the purpose of the University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD) and the Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities (LEND) program is to bridge the gap between the university based knowledge and community-based services by incorporating the aforementioned elements.

As a part of the Combating Autism Act Initiative, the LEND program at the Sparks clinic was able to receive supplemental funding specifically to focus on Autism Spectrum Disorders and related disabilities. This has allowed them to formalize some of the things they were already doing and to expand upon some of those projects in terms of research, screening, treatment and education. The main goal with the additional funding is to incorporate in their training the knowledge to increase the number of professionals who can identify and recognize ASD and make appropriate referrals.

Waiting lists are still long, 9-12 months for school age and a couple months for toddler-preschool. Even with increased evaluations per week, the waiting list has remained long. They are currently focusing on increasing capacity to increase diagnostics. Kathy Welch with Easter Seals shared that they have recently started an Autism clinic and currently have no waiting list and gave the phone number of 334-288-0240.

Representative Ward thanked Dr. Griffith and Dr. O'Kelley for sharing with the Council such a wonderful presentation.

The floor was then opened for announcements. Representative Ward mentioned that APT is currently working on a documentary that will deal with the issue of ASD in Alabama and have interviewed various council members and parents across the state.

Kathy Welch also shared that Easter Seals is having a Seminar on November 6th called Successful Daily Living and Behavioral Strategies for Children with Autism or Special Needs. There is a brochure on their website with the details.

Cary Boswell of the Department of Rehabilitation Services stated the Early Intervention Conference will be next month. Kim Hill gave the dates as November 16 -18 at BJCC. Details are at www.ucpconference.org.

Dr. Klinger shared about the Alabama Autism Conference which will be February 26th; the theme is Adolescence Transition to Adulthood in Adulthood.

Cary Boswell briefly mentioned that as part of the stimulus funds for vocational rehabilitation, they have \$2 million dollars out for projects and they are asking for creative and innovative projects to focus on people with the most significant disabilities, the underserved population, the hard to serve population, and populations in underserved areas of the state. One of those populations listed out is Autism. Grant information can be found at rehab.alabama.gov.

Representative Ward congratulated the Autism Society of Alabama as the Walmart Foundation just announced a \$5 thousand dollar grant for them.

John Houston remarked that the presentations and discussions today prompted a couple of thoughts. Firstly, there is a lot more going on in the state relative to ASD than he ever realized. Secondly, it is pretty disconnected. Problems include waiting lists, transportation issues, and eligibility questions. One of the things he hopes can be accomplished is to inventory those things and find ways to work together and eliminate or lessen these issues and problems individuals are having in accessing what is already in place.

Representative Ward agreed.

The next meeting of the AIACC is scheduled for Thursday, January 7th in the same location, at AIDT.

With no further comments from the floor, the meeting was adjourned.