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Allen: What does Lansing have against families impacted by autism?

Colleen Allen

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In a panic, a middle-aged mother from Grand Rapids dials a toll-free help line and begs for help. “We are in the emergency room with my 20-year-old son,” she says. “He’s hurting himself and attacking me. Our home is a disaster. He put holes in the walls and destroyed our furniture. We have no other choice but to call the police or leave him in the ER.”

A young mother from Flint calls the same line: “My 2-year-old daughter was just diagnosed with autism. What does this mean? What should I expect from my local school system? There are so many therapies out there; how do I know what works?”

A weary father calls: “We are parents of a 45-year-old son who lives with us. He needs constant care and attention. What housing and long-term support options exist for him when someday we are no longer here?”

These are the real-life cases that come to our organization, Autism Alliance of Michigan (AAoM), every single day, and when we connect these families to the services, support and resources they need, it comes at no cost to them. Our ability to serve this population is possible because the state of Michigan has contributed funding for our autism navigator program since 2015. Our vast network of philanthropic supporters has also allowed AAoM to match a portion of these dollars, creating a successful model for a public-private partnership.

We have steadily grown the number of individuals we serve, now serving almost 4,000 Michigianians per year – for a total of nearly 20,000 people from every single region of our state since our inception. At the same time, our state leadership has recognized the need and value of this program, progressively raising our funding level, now at \$2 million per year. We consistently over-deliver on our grant objectives. The value and return on investment have never been questioned.

Which is why I am so perplexed with the decision by our state leaders to remove AAoM's autism navigator funding from the final state budget.

I cannot think of a single state-funded program that serves more than 4,000 residents each year for \$2 million. Our small but mighty team is made up of exceptional professionals spanning a wide range of credentials – specifically designed to address the broad spectrum of people we serve. Given the chaos and confusion which exist right now regarding the cause and treatment for autism, we are needed more than ever.

Without our autism navigators, I worry that parents will make critical decisions about their child's care without credible, reliable information and guidance. The systems every family must navigate are complex, and even with my doctorate degree, I still rely on a network of brilliant colleagues to help me understand the unique policies, funding mechanisms and complicated documentation required just to get a basic service.

I have no idea what decision-making process took place in Lansing that led to such a bad outcome for the autism community. It is not clear where the blame lies, and at this point, it really doesn't matter. I'm just asking, on behalf of so many who can't do so themselves, to fix this problem so we can get back to the newly diagnosed 2-year-old, the 20-year-old stuck in an emergency room with his panicked parents and the aging mother and father who just need answers.

Colleen Allen is president & CEO of the Autism Alliance of Michigan.