
County social workers seek to meet needs of families living with autism

Washington County social workers heard the need, and created a new support system for Washington County parents with children with autism.

They provided an update to the Washington County Board of Commissioners at the end of 2009 on their efforts during the year. A parent of a child who has autism, Susan Grubb, shared her personal experience and acknowledged the support already provided by the community, and offered suggestions for future support.

Social workers in Washington County working with families who have children or adults who are developmentally disabled saw a change in new clients in recent years. Almost half of new clients had been diagnosed with autism. Due to this increase in new cases that involve autism, the county's developmental disability unit of the Community Services Department formed the Autism Committee to coordinate services to those with autism.

Social workers were seeing a "pretty significant" increase in the number of clients with autism, said Winna Bernard, Washington County senior social worker who works with those with developmental disabilities. It was time to aid both the social workers and the families of the clients, she said. An early task for the Autism Committee was to identify areas of need, and a survey was sent to families who have a child or adult with autism. One of the needs that was consistently voiced was in finding and using resources and programs in the community. From that grew the creation of a resource guide. Its 12 pages detail listings of where families may turn for help, in school districts, for therapy, for a medical diagnosis, for financial and medical support.

The list especially targets Washington County resources, social worker Paul Simon said, as the group recognized that many programs for such families exist in the western metropolitan area, with few available in the east metro. Gathering information for the programs that do exist was key, Simon said.

The committee also compiled a list of care providers who are able to work with children with autism and other developmental disabilities, and provides training for those care providers. The group also developed an intake packet, which helps provide continuity of care among families served by the county, to assure services are consistent, Simon said.

At the same time, each case is a unique client and family, which is why social workers need specific training to work with the individual clients, Simon said.

The group created a newsletter, Community Links, paid for by a grant, that will be distributed starting with the new year. Committee members are pleased with the progress made in such a short time, Bernard said. "That just tells you the passion that is behind this," she said.

During a workshop session at the end of the year, County Board members heard from parent, Susan Grubb, who has a 14-year-old son with autism. She emphasized that there are more and more families

who are aware of autism as they have a family member who has autism, or know someone who does. They need to be connected to programs to enhance the lives of those with autism, she said. She noted her strong support from the Stillwater school system, and that her son continues to make progress in learning. "One of the challenges of autism is that everything has to be taught differently," she said, including basic language skills and simple tasks that other children learn by observing and imitating.

But the most apparent difference is that social skills of people with autism do not develop naturally, which can be "crippling," Bernard said.

Grubb described the isolation experienced by families with an autistic member, since the condition can manifest itself in an inability to participate in social activities, to be in crowds, to eat at restaurants or community gatherings, all of which mean that the family forgoes social interaction. Grubb also recounted the toll that autism takes on a family – the financial toll when one parent must forego employment to care for the child; the emotional toll when more than 85 percent of families with an autistic child is split by divorce; the physical toll when the stress that the family endures causes chronic conditions like high blood pressure and depression; the personal toll when families lose privacy when applying for public assistance to help pay for therapy and other support.

But Grubb is also looking toward the future. She sees her 14-year-old son as in the first wave of young people with autism who face an uncertain future, regarding who will provide care and guidance if needed. "The ramifications are enormous," she said, as the young people grow up and move into society. Grubb sees little preparation for a place for the young people in the workplace. "We can never die because we have to look after this child," she said of the thoughts that go through the minds of parents with children with autism and their uncertain future.

For more information about how families may gain access to services provided by the Autism Committee, call the intake and informational line at Washington County at 651-430-6484.