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Righting a Wrong: The Caring for Military Kids with Autism Act

Posted in: **Top Story**

Dec. 7, 2011

In 2004, a U.S. Marine serving in Iraq was wounded in Fallujah and later medically retired because of his injuries. In 2009, the same Marine was told that his son had been diagnosed with autism. But when he sought medical coverage for his son's behavioral therapy through the military's TRICARE healthcare system, he was denied. The reason? Such coverage is available only to dependents of active duty service members. When the family sought a Medicaid waiver for supplemental coverage of their son's treatment, they were told the waiting list for services was over nine years long. The retired Marine and his family have since been forced to cover nearly \$5,000 a month in behavioral therapy costs on their own.

Bipartisan legislation that would reverse this wrong experienced by this Marine and other military families is quietly gaining momentum in Congress with the support of military families and Autism Speaks, the nation's largest autism science and advocacy organization.

Sponsored by Congressmen John Larson (CT-1) and Walter Jones (NC-3), the Caring for Military Kids with Autism Act, (HR.2288) would clarify that coverage provided under TRICARE for medically necessary autism therapies, such as Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), are a covered benefit for TRICARE beneficiaries impacted by autism, regardless of the service member's duty status.

"This bill works to protect the promise of continued family care following retirement. Given all our military families have sacrificed in service to our country, it is simply the right thing to do," says Karen Driscoll, a Marine Corps wife and mother of a son with autism. "I believe we as a nation have an ethical obligation to care for our military service members AND their families. Support for HR 2288 addresses the medical needs of some of our most vulnerable military families today...those impacted by autism. I hope Congress will take action."

Since the bill was introduced in June by Representatives Larson and Jones, 19 more House members have signed on as co-sponsors.

"Autism Speaks commends Congressmen Larson and Jones for their commitment to individuals with autism and their families, and for making autism insurance coverage a legislative priority, especially for military families," said Peter Bell, Autism Speaks

executive vice president of programs and services. “Families across the country are literally going broke trying to provide their children with the therapies they need and deserve. The fact that our military families, who serve to protect our freedom and security, could be put in this situation is shameful.”

Autism is a general terms for a group of complex disorders of brain development, characterized, in varying degrees, by difficulties in social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication and repetitive behaviors. Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) can be associated with intellectual disability, difficulties in motor coordination and attention and physical health issues such as sleep and gastrointestinal disturbances.

According to the national Centers for Disease Control; the prevalence of autism has grown 600 percent in the past two decades and now affects 1 in every 110 American children. But among military families, the prevalence rate is estimated at 1 in every 88 children.

Nearly 24,000 military dependents, including children of active duty, reserve and guard, and retirees have been diagnosed with autism. Military life is particularly difficult for children with autism and their families— because of frequent duty changes and the social turmoil of military service, military children with autism face challenges that their civilian counterparts do not.

A specific feature of autism is the need for children to have a set routine, stability, and continuity of services and relationships. Military life by its nature cannot offer such routines, a situation likely to weaken the morale of the parent serving the military as well as the caretaker at home. Effective behavioral health treatments, including ABA, work to build the skills needed to help individuals cope with these changes and address other areas of need including safety awareness, communication, family relationships, and more.

Autism Speaks has successfully advocated for legislation at the federal and state levels to ease the burdens of families raising children with autism and improving insurance coverage of autism care. Honoring our Nation’s heroes, Autism Speaks will continue its advocacy for the Caring for Military Kids with Autism Act. If families want to assist in this effort, we strongly recommend you contact your Congressman and ask they co-sponsor the Caring for Military Kids with Autism Act (HR. 2288).



Caption: Marine with 3rd Battalion 5th Marines greeted by his children (both with autism) after a long and challenging deployment to Afghanistan. HR 2288 clarifies TRICARE coverage of ABA treatment for military children with autism.



Caption: Shane was diagnosed with autism in 2009. Shane's Dad is a wounded warrior and retired Marine. Shane's ABA therapy is not currently covered by TRICARE because Dad is retired.

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