



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Michael F. Nozzolio

## Nozzolio: We Must Provide For Families Affected By Autism

MICHAEL F. NOZZOLIO

Parents told me about their struggles - not just to meet the needs of their autistic child but the needs of their other children, their spouses, and their professional lives. Divorce rates are high among families with a child diagnosed with autism and issues of child care and after-school care present huge obstacles for these families.

Autism impairs an individual's ability to communicate and relate to others and symptoms can range from very mild to severe. Autism is a neurobiological disorder that can often be diagnosed at an early age. Unfortunately, the rate of diagnosis is continuing to increase. Today, 1 in 150 individuals are being diagnosed with autism, making it more common than pediatric cancer, diabetes, and AIDS combined. It occurs in all racial, ethnic, and social groups and is four times more likely to strike boys than girls.

As a State Senator, I was aware of many of the facts and statistics associated with autism and had participated in legislative hearings in Albany concerned with services for autistic individuals. However, I wanted to learn more about the personal aspect of the illness after meeting seventeen year-old Lyndsy Bayer of Webster. I met Lyndsy for the first time last year at a fundraiser organized by friends and family to help purchase a service dog for her.

Lyndsy was diagnosed with autism when she was just five years old. Since that time, her family has faced enormous challenges in meeting her educational, social and safety needs. Because she often wanders without concern for her own personal safety, her parents worked to successfully raise the needed funds to purchase a service dog that will be trained to alert them to Lyndsy's needs.

The dedication and love that Lyndsy's parents have for their child was an inspiration to me and I have been working with other families in my Senate district who are facing many of the same challenges faced by the Bayer family.

Last year's summit meeting allowed families, providers, and health and educational officials to come together to discuss this complex issue. The discussion helped to educate participants on what services and programs are currently available and to discuss the need for additional support for families and providers. I was very pleased with the number of area professionals who gave their time to participate and who offered guidance on health and educational assistance for families.

Autism is an extremely complex problem in our society, and the number of children being diagnosed is increasing. Autism disorders can usually be reliably diagnosed by age 3. Parents are usually the first to notice unusual behaviors in their child and early intervention is critical to gain maximum benefit from existing therapies. Currently, there are no effective means to prevent autism, no fully effective treatments, and no cure.

Research indicates, however, that early intervention in an educational setting for at least two years during the preschool years can result in significant improvements for many young children with autism.

In the Rochester region, we are fortunate to have a world renowned autism educational center at the Golisano Children's Hospital at Strong Memorial Hospital. The nationally recognized faculty provides training to teachers, parents, providers, and health officials on several important topics related to promoting independence and quality of life for persons with developmental disabilities.

There are literally hundreds of families in my Senate District affected by this disorder and our discussion provided me with the opportunity to learn more about the particular challenges they face. As a result of the information that was shared that day, all of the participants-myself included-now have a better understanding of the services and programs that exist for those with autism.

In the months and years ahead, I look forward to continuing to work on the behalf of individuals with autism and their families. As part of my efforts, I will be reviewing legislation concerning autism and seek additional state funding for programs that will benefit those with autism.

In an effort to help direct additional funding for programs and development of services, I am pleased to announce a \$ 40,000.00 New York State grant for Happiness House in Geneva. Happiness House is a part of the Finger Lakes Cerebral Palsy Association and provides educational assistance for children with disabilities. A significant portion of this grant will be used for the autism classroom to assist the teachers and therapists who work with autistic children.

Families coping with a diagnosis of autism deserve all the help, support and compassion that we can provide. I admire the determination of these individuals to provide every possible opportunity for their children. We cannot let them down.

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