

Dear Madam Chair, and LHHS committee members,

6/15/2017

Please find a way to reconsider cuts to DDSD autism specific programs. These are not luxuries, they are vital to these individuals and to families.

When I helped establish Camp Rising Sun 11 years ago, we did not fully realize how much more this camp would become than a fun time for kids. If you have ever gone to a sleep away" camp as a child, you know that there is a lot of growing up that happens but this is especially true for children with autism.

There are three goals in the Camp Rising Sun mission statement.

1. To provide for a summer camp experience as typical as possible for children with autism by providing needed supports. Children with asd often have a hard time with change. By learning that they don't have to follow old routines and can learn new ways to do things, they become open to growth – all kinds of growth!

True story: An 8 year old named Alex came to camp and the parents warned that getting dressed might be a battle. We suggested that this child's daily clothes be put into big Zip Lock bags marked "Monday", Tuesday" etc. But the parents forgot to mention that the only way they could brush Alex's teeth was for dad to hold him in a bear hug while mom pried open his mouth to brush them herself. The camp counselor didn't know that Alex had never brushed his own teeth and aided Alex in teeth brushing step by step for 5 days. The morning after Alex returned home, he got up and put on the clothes set out in the zip lock bag and was discovered happily brushing his own teeth by his amazed mom and dad.

I have seen and heard similar stories of changed behavior patterns and achievement over and over. Children who have never slept in a bed unless snuggled between mom and dad, have learned the joys of their own bed. Difficult children have learned to take turns and cheer each other on. They have learned to make real friends.

2. To provide training for camp counselors and professionals in the population to understand and support growth in children and teens with autism. We have recruited the counselors from a wide population but especially from students who are studying education and health related careers. We have trained aspiring teachers, speech therapists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, psychologists, nurses and doctors, physical education majors, business students and music majors. They have all were unsure how to relate to the campers at first, but with guidance and training, they have been converted to become the strongest supporters of individuals with autism. They learn that there is a wide span of abilities and challenges along the autism spectrum. Many counselors have told me that their time at Camp Rising Sun changed their life and their goals more than anything else they have ever done. From the tears in their eyes, I believe them. No matter what role they assume in the future, they will be advocates for acceptance and support for individuals with autism in the community and in the work force.

Note: The addition of peers and siblings to the mix of campers has been an amazing catalyst for change too. These children learn how to understand that what might be seen as "unusual" behavior and communication as a difference which can be accepted as part of their new friend. They serve as good role models for interactions and some learn better ways of relating to siblings. They return to their local schools able to be a friend to a child with differences.

3. To provide respite for parents and families who deal with issues of autism. Most parent get a break from parenting sometimes. The kids go to grandma's or they get a babysitter or they tell the kids to go play in the yard. Children with autism are often very unpredictable and so need constant and close supervision. This constant vigilance is exhausting. Getting a break for a few days can do wonders for the mental health of parents and caregivers. They can sleep late or finally paint the living room without worrying about the chaos which normally results from such wild decisions. The mental health of the parents and siblings is important to the mental health of the children – those with autism and those without.

Camp Rising Sun is not just a terrific place for children with autism, it is a classroom for teaching autism education and development for a population that is increasing rapidly. Thank you for any support you can give. Constance Molecke, 12100 St. Mary's Dr. NE, Albuquerque, NM 87111, 505-321-7698.