

Testimony Presented to
New Mexico Legislature- Disability Concerns Subcommittee
Re: Development of Autism Diagnosis, Assessment, and Services in New Mexico
Rick Loewenstein, Chief Strategy and Growth Officer, Centria Autism Services
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Good afternoon Senator Rodriguez and members of this committee. My name is Rick Loewenstein and I am Chief Strategy and Growth Officer for Centria Autism Services, a leading national provider of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) with operations in New Mexico, Michigan, Texas, California, and Washington, and soon to be in Oregon, and Arizona. We currently provide in-home and center-based ABA therapy to more than 800 children, including 40 in New Mexico. Our commitment to children with autism and their families in NM is to serve the entire state of New Mexico with Stage 1, 2, and 3 services, and work to break down any barrier to those services.

Our entry this year into New Mexico came at the request of one of the Centennial Care Managed Care Organizations (MCOs), who expressed their challenge with the shortage of autism providers and Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs) in the state, thus forcing children with autism to wait many, many months for much needed services.

As an organization, part of Centria's successful growth is our community-based approach, that is, learning who the stakeholders are in the community, meeting with them to understand their needs, and finding opportunities to work collaboratively in support of children with autism and their families. In the past 8 months I have personally visited New Mexico 6 times, traveling from Albuquerque to Clovis and from Las Cruces to Santa Fe. I'm proud to say we are serving almost 40 children in 10 cities across the state (including communities of Clovis, Roswell, Farmington, Almgordo, White Rock, and Carlsbad), while employing more than 60 New Mexican residents. We anticipate serving an additional 30 children in the next 2 months, with a need to hire at least 50 team members.

Based on my time here, and my experience and Centria's experience in serving families living with autism in multiple states across the country, I would like to take this opportunity to share my thoughts regarding autism legislation, access to services, assessment and diagnosis, and direct services in New Mexico.

First, let me begin by applauding the Legislature for adopting legislation that has paved the way for access to ABA therapy for thousands of New Mexico's children. Next, I want to commend the work of Jennifer Chavez at the New Mexico Medical Assistance Division and Dauna Howerton of the New Mexico Contract Services for Behavioral Health. The way the system was designed, as a collaborative among all MCOs who worked together to standardize the authorization process, is a model for the country. Their knowledge and encouragement were much appreciated as we entered this new market.



Another excellent initiative, launched by the FIT program, requires their staff to administer the Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers (M-CHAT), an early screening tool which aids in the early identification of children with autism. Early diagnosis improves treatment opportunities through early intervention, and lays the foundation for success and quality of life for children with autism and their families. Finally, I want to recognize the great work of Sara Baca and the New Mexico Autism Society, as well as Shawn Quigley and the outstanding staff at the Center for Development and Disability (CDD). New Mexico is lucky to have such competent, dedicated, resourceful professionals working in this state on behalf of children with autism.

While there are many bright spots in the autism landscape in New Mexico, there remains a high demand for services, lack of human resources to meet the demand, and bottlenecks in the system. At the same time, there are opportunities for legislators and community leaders to continue New Mexico's leadership in serving the autism community.

Stage 1 Bottleneck

In New Mexico there are hundreds and hundreds of children with autism waiting to receive Stage 1 services (assessment). This challenge is exacerbated by the limited number of Stage 1 providers. Currently, only a Licensed Psychologist (LP), Development Pediatrician, or Pediatric Neurologist can perform this stage to determine whether ABA will be an effective therapy. In New Mexico, there are only 5 or 6 active LPs authorized to perform this Stage of service.

Recommendation #1: The Subcommittee should consider allowing Limited Licensed Psychologists (LLP) to complete Stage 1 testing as long as the evaluations are signed off by a Licensed Psychologist.

Recommendation #2: The Subcommittee should consider putting a workgroup together made up of legislative staff, UNM, NMSU, New Mexico Autism Society, Centennial Care MCOs, and State Association of Psychologists to find a solution. I understand there is some work going on to address the Stage 1 bottleneck, and we would welcome the opportunity to be part of a formal workgroup.

Stage 2 Bottleneck

Stage 2 services include a behavior assessment performed by a BCBA, as well as a treatment plan. When we entered the market there were 32 BCBA's in New Mexico, half of which were in education. While UNM has an excellent program with a course sequence that leads to this certification, it is not enough to meet the high demand.

Recommendation #1: The Subcommittee should consider re-instating the mid-level clinician status (BCaBA or Interim Supervisor) that expired at the end of June 2016. This will accomplish 3 things:

1. It will help remove a barrier of access for children and families
2. It gives Providers more options for meeting demand while continuing to ensure quality outcomes with BCBA supervision
3. It provides an attractive continuum of education and career track for future BCBA's



Recommendation #2: The Subcommittee should consider financially supporting any New Mexico university focused on building an ABA/ BCBA program.

Stage 3 Challenge

Following a Stage 2 behavior assessment and treatment plan by a BCBA, intensive one-on-one ABA therapy is then rendered by a Registered Behavior Technician (RBT) in accordance with the treatment plan. In New Mexico, RBT status must be completed within the first 6 months of employment. There is high demand for this vocation, and I'm proud to report that Centria Autism Services is a program partner with CNM Ingenuity in developing an open enrollment RBT curriculum designed to meet the 40 hour training requirement for credentialing with the Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB). The program will launch August 29, 2016 and consists of on-line and in-person training.

Recommendation: The Subcommittee should consider financially supporting CNM Ingenuity by providing scholarships to students interested in this field. The program provides hands-on experience and is an excellent career track in the fields of education, special education, psychology, or healthcare, not to mention, good paying jobs are immediately available.

In closing, I would again like to thank the Committee for inviting me to provide testimony this afternoon. I'm proud of the team we've built in New Mexico in 8 months, and honored to be working with dedicated, committed stakeholders in communities across the state. Early intervention is key and any barrier to services that can be erased will not only benefit a child with autism, it will impact their family, their friends, and their community.

Personally, I look forward to working collaboratively with our partners in New Mexico in the months and years ahead, and offer myself and Centria's resources to provide solutions to this growing need.

Thank you, and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

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