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Autism therapies save money down the road



JILL TOYOSHIBA

One in 110 children is thought to be affected by autism. Providing therapy helps them become more productive adults.

Parents of toddlers with autism know that early and intensive therapy can raise IQ levels, improve language skills and behavior, and help children succeed in school and life.

But few families in Missouri and Kansas receive that opportunity. Insurance firms are unwilling to pay for the therapy, which can cost \$30,000 to \$70,000 a year. State governments don't want to pay either.

But that's shortsighted thinking. Studies calculate that a person with moderate to severe autism will cost society from \$3.2 million to \$4.3 million in lost productivity, special education costs and adult care. Much of that price tag will be borne by state governments. With early and effective treatments, those estimates shrink by half or more.

For the sake of children, families and their own long-term financial health, Missouri and Kansas must join the list of states that require insurance companies to pay for behavioral therapy for the growing numbers of children diagnosed with autism.

Fortunately, Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon says an insurance mandate is one of his top priorities for this year's legislative session. The idea has bipartisan support.

"While I normally oppose mandates, I, like many Republicans, support this requirement," said Rep. Jeff Grisamore of Lee's Summit, who is co-sponsoring a bill in the House. "It is the right thing to do for children and families affected by autism and the cost-effective thing for the state."

Advocates must make sure the legislation isn't damaged by unrealistic caps and exemptions as it makes its way through the legislature.

Prospects in Kansas are less clear, despite a two-year push by families and advocates. Legislation stalled in committee last year, with key lawmakers voicing concerns that a mandate would significantly hike insurance premiums overall.

That hasn't happened elsewhere, however. The earliest states to pass insurance mandates have found that premium increases amounted to less than \$1 a month.

Kansas's treatment of its developmentally disabled citizens is a scandal. More than 4,200 families are on waiting lists for services.

At least 15 percent of the citizens receiving or seeking services are affected by autism. By requiring insurance companies to pay for treatments, Kansas could provide relief for a number of families and free up money to help persons with other kinds of disabilities.

One of 110 children is thought to be affected by some form of autism, a developmental disorder that affects concentration, language and interpersonal relationships. Persons with severe forms of autism will have trouble functioning independently as adults.

"If you can get in with effective early intervention, you can change the outcomes for many of these kids," said Rochelle Harris, a clinical psychologist at Children's Mercy Hospital.

While scientists have yet to figure out why the incidence of autism is increasing, it's certain the problem isn't going away. Kansas and Missouri must join the states that are coping with the autism crisis with a cost-effective, humane approach.