

Special Order – April 1, 2010 – Alaska House of Representatives

April is Autism Awareness Month and tomorrow is World Autism Day. You may have seen the flyer my staff has placed in your mailbox to make you aware of that.

Mr. Speaker, much progress has been made in the treatment of autism in recent years. Treatments have been developed to make it possible for almost half the children who are diagnosed early with autism to receive the needed intense 1-on-1 behavioral training they need to go on to attend classes with their classmates that reduces the need to be in a special education class. Now, Mr. Speaker, we all know how much more costly special education is, so it is important to note that the states that have health insurance mandates to cover autism spectrum disorders are saving as much as \$20,000 per year per child in special education costs, so that adds up to over \$200,000 per student's career. If they get the help they need when they are young, they are able to get their brains rewired and many of them go on to live productive lives. It is projected that over \$3 million in social service costs can be saved per person over their lifetimes.

Mr. Speaker, because of problems that families with autistic children here in Alaska have, I learned about this about 14 months ago when a mother came to my office to explain the dire financial situation her family was forced to be in because of the denial of coverage by her health insurance carrier. After hearing that she had been forced to take a second mortgage out on her home and spend down her other children's savings funds to get her child the help he needed, I became outraged. I couldn't believe that a health insurance company would be allowed to deny coverage in that situation. So I put my staff to work on the issue, and after researching autism I found out that 9 other states had passed autism insurance mandates, and in the last year 10 additional states have passed similar legislation.

Now there is a bill that has been introduced here in the House of Representatives that would require health insurance companies here in Alaska to cover autism spectrum disorders. It has 21 sponsors and co-sponsors. I am very disappointed this legislation has not passed. I've had numerous inquiries to me why this bill is not already in force. People have stopped me in the hallway; I've even been stopped in parking lots in downtown Juneau to ask me what is going on with this legislation.

I've seen information recently, Mr. Speaker, that says the health insurance sector was the second most profitable industry in 2009, second only to the banking industry. I wonder, maybe we all wonder why health insurance companies are so successful and make that much money. Well it's simple, Mr. Speaker: they deny claims. If you continue deny and deny and deny, eventually many people will give up and stop sending in the claims, and that money goes right to the bottom line. Now the largest health insurance company in this country, the CEO, over a 10-year period, made \$1.5 billion himself, that's \$150 million per year. I wonder how a person heading a health insurance company making \$150 million a year can sleep at night knowing that autistic children and their families are given this extra burden so that he can buy himself a personal chef, etc.

Mr. Speaker, in conclusion, everyday that we delay passage of this insurance mandate, we relegate more children with autism to a life with few options or opportunities, or maybe even a life of institutionalization. Mr. Speaker, I believe that every Alaskan child deserves a chance at a normal life. Thank you.