

Legislature can improve autism care



Jerry Lara / San Antonio Express-News

Gael Gonzalez, 6, reacts during an exercise to improve his communications and social skills at an autism clinic at the Children's Hospital of San Antonio. The Legislature has the chance to make applied behavior analysis accessible to more Texas families.

In its latest effort to improve the lives of those affected by autism, the Kronkosky Charitable Foundation has launched a critical new website that links treatment and services to families in the San Antonio region.

The website, www.autismlifelinelinks.org, is the second step in the Kronkosky Foundation's ongoing work on behalf of autism treatment and awareness.

Readers may remember that this summer, the Kronkosky Foundation released a detailed study finding 1 in 79 people in this region is on the autism spectrum, a range of social disorders. That report highlighted the intense shortage of experts in San Antonio who can diagnose and provide life-changing therapy to children.

That therapy is called applied behavior analysis, or ABA. The wait time for ABA can be years, but children with autism don't have that kind of time. With ABA, the sooner, the better.

Enter www.autismlifelinelinks.org, which serves as a one-stop destination for information and services for those families who have found themselves adrift with an autism diagnosis. Through the site, families will only have to fill out one set of forms, not form after form as

they move between service providers. They will immediately be placed on waitlists for diagnosis and treatment. Staff will check in with families.

"We think this will be a game-changer for families in our area wrestling with autism," said J. Tullos Wells, Kronkosky Foundation's managing director, who has led this initiative.

There are about 30,000 people in San Antonio with an autism diagnosis.

On its own, the website, which San Antonio-based TAVHealth created, does not directly affect the agonizing wait times. That's an issue tied to the region's lack of experts. But the site has the potential to dramatically change what happens during the wait time because families are immediately linked with the autism community, which can provide crucial nonclinical support.

These would be activities and services such as parties, sitters or hairdressers who are trained to work with people with autism. Such community support at least makes the wait period easier.

“Even if we can get them on the waitlist, it doesn’t mean we can get them through the door for diagnostic service any faster,” Helene R. Freymann, executive director of Autism Lifeline Links, said. “One of the things the TAV platform allows us to do is to track the waiting lists. To see how many people are in our system. To understand they were enrolled in our system on this day (and reach out to them).”

This brings us to the next step in the Kronkosky Foundation’s incredible efforts on behalf of families with autism. The Kronkosky Foundation is pushing for two key legislative changes next session that could dramatically improve access to treatment for Texans with autism — at no cost to taxpayers.

The first is for Texas to require insurers to cover ABA therapy. The second is to license autism behavioral analysts here so they can bill through Medicaid.

Wells told us that Texas trains behavioral analysts, only to lose crucial workers because of its policies. They go to other states where ABA is better covered.

“Texas has disincentives to families getting access to ABA therapies, and that’s one of the things we want to fix,” he said.

Insurers have been resistant to covering ABA therapy because it is expensive. It costs upward of \$50,000 a year, and generally has to be applied anywhere from 25 to 40 hours a week for about two years to make a difference.

“Early access to ABA has a positive impact on children and families immediately,” said Berenice de la Cruz, chief operating officer at Autism Community Network.

Applied behavior analysis therapy is not a cure, but it does move the needle for many children. To not require insurers to cover the therapy is tantamount to a cost shift. It means that taxpayers and families pay in the form of increased special education costs, diminished work prospects for adults with autism and the possibility of residential care. In that sense, autism affects all of us.

We strongly encourage Bexar County’s delegation to make coverage for ABA therapy a priority this legislative session. It’s a legislative opportunity to better lives.