

## **Developmental Disabilities**

### **Issues**

- Inconsistent availability of early screening, referral and intervention services; need for coordinated region-wide systems. Diagnosing children at younger ages is an important factor in the proliferation of treatment options. In the past, children with autism spectrum disorders were diagnosed when they were between 5 and 10 years of age; treatment programs were less refined and less effective. Reaching these children earlier, at 24 to 36 months old, increases treatment effectiveness.
- Despite the increase in media interest and the expansion of treatment options, there are few information resources for families needing help with the Autism Spectrum Disorder treatment process. Parents and children navigating treatment decisions are faced with conflicting information, sometimes controversial therapies, and the lack of specialized therapists and support networks.
- Workforce issues identified at 2008 stakeholder meeting:
  - High turnover due to non-competitive salaries
  - Lack of training for mid-management positions
  - Lack of leadership development in the field
  - Lack of professional development opportunities (conferences, training)
- Dramatic increase in number of children diagnosed with autism.
- Parents of children with developmental disabilities experience high levels of stress.
- Children with developmental disabilities have higher rates of obesity.
- Lack of services (and difficulty in paying) for individuals with developmental disabilities who also are diagnosed with a psychological disorder.
- Lack of advocacy for state-of-the-art treatment in this field.
- Public and private school teachers have low awareness/understanding of autism spectrum disorders.

- Children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorders and severe behavior problems continue to present a service challenge. The MA Department of Mental Retardation (DMR) has been charged with planning for youth up to age 18 along the autism spectrum. However, there remains a need for additional service resources.
- Autistic people often have skills that are at many different levels--to the point that the same child may have a 12th-grade ability in one subject, and a preschooler's ability in another which presents significant challenges to schools.
- Need for lead poisoning prevention legislation to provide for primary prevention and improved screening to prevent disability in children resulting from exposures to lead in housing and other sources.
- Need for the collection and analysis of data to determine localities with a high incidence of developmental disabilities and possible environmental causes.
- Issues around developmental disabilities and juvenile justice system: 1) focus on screening and intervention for the previously undiagnosed; 2) focus on GED and post-secondary education, career support, transition and reentry support; 3) integration of family-based treatment programs.