

Pentagon Looks to Meet Needs of Autistic Kids

By Gayle S. Putrich

The Pentagon needs help from military families with autistic children to create a new segment of its Extended Care Health Option (ECHO) program.

Under the 2007 Defense Authorization Act, Congress is requiring the Defense Department to create a new action plan under the existing ECHO program to provide more and better services for families with autistic children.

Tricare officials are now reaching out to such families for suggestions on what kind of education, training and supervisory requirements caregivers should have. Input is also needed to help set standards for caregiver training and ways to ensure children on all points of the autism spectrum receive the care they need through Tricare and ECHO programs in concert with other publicly provided services.

Any military family members with suggestions can email the Tricare Management Activity at ChildrenWithAutism@tma.osd.mil through the end of 2007.

"It is vital we learn about affected beneficiaries and their personal experiences, so Tricare may better meet their needs," said Army Maj. Gen. Elder Granger, deputy director of the Tricare Management Activity. "We look forward to expanding available treatment options and access to care for beneficiaries with autism."

Autistic children in military families currently are covered for only a handful of treatments, including Applied Behavioral Analysis. Tricare covers up to \$2,500 of the hands-on therapy, with a co-pay, as long as the treatment is administered by a certified provider who meets qualifications. Uncertified caregivers are not covered, even if properly supervised. Tricare will share the cost of training if a family member wants to become certified.

According to the Autism Society of America, one in every 150 children is born with some form of autism, considered the "fastest-growing developmental disability" in the U.S., up 172 percent since 1990. But researchers also say that early diagnosis and intervention can cut the lifelong cost of care for those with autism by two-thirds.