



**a coalition for**  
**change**

**Arizona Autism  
Coalition forms  
to unite efforts**

**BY BETH COCHRAN**

When Jessica Lewis first learned her husband had landed a job in Phoenix, she wasn't too thrilled about trading in her 20-minute drive to the beach, cool weather and the lush green surroundings of Irvine, Calif., for the desert. As a mother of son with autism, she was even less thrilled about navigating the fractured process of finding and receiving services in Arizona.

Originally from Arizona, Lewis relocated to southern California, had two children, Elijah, 3, and Sadie, 14 months. She didn't realize how easy California made the process for parents of children with autism until she began searching for the same services here.

"The process in California is so much more seamless and I was very reluctant to move because every time I would call to inquire about services I always got the run around," she says. "Until I was able to have services in place for Elijah, I wasn't going to move because I didn't want him to have a lapse in services."

In her search, Lewis found the Southwest Autism Research & Resource Center (SARRC) – and that was the deal maker. She decided to follow her husband and, after enrolling her two children in the SARRC Community School, she began looking for open positions at the center. She soon learned about the newly formed Arizona Autism Coalition and about a job opportunity that would allow her to help change the system she found so discouraging.

### A COMMON GOAL

The coalition is made up of several agencies, who, like Lewis, believe there should be a better way for parents to find services for their children. The idea for the coalition was borne out of an Arizona Technical Assistance Planning (TAP) grant secured by SARRC in 2006. The grant, which came from St. Luke's Health Initiatives, was aimed at bringing together the Maricopa County agencies that serve children and families affected by ASDs. The original TAP group included SARRC, the Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, Specializing in the Education of Exceptional Kids, Southwest Human Development and United Cerebral Palsy.

After the grant expired, the group continued to meet, adding seven more providers to its informal coalition. These included Play ABA/Chrysalis Academy, HOPE Group, Arizona Autism Support, Guthrie Mainstream Services, Guthrie Recreation

and Education Therapy, Loden Group and A.S.S.I.S.T. Corp.

Together these groups hosted a kick-off event for the coalition, garnering more than 30 statements of interest from agencies and individuals. The group hosted a second meeting in September and hired on their first and only employee – Jessica Lewis, Arizona Autism Coalition coordinator.

### STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

The meeting in September helped solidify the coalition's belief that the spirit of collaboration is very much alive in Arizona. More than 50 concerned educators, parents, members of the medical and nonprofit communities and agencies who serve families affected by autism came together, all with the same goal in mind: To streamline the delivery of services for families affected by autism.

"The number and quality of people who attended was amazing," says Patty McCartney, co-director of Play ABA/Chrysalis Academy. "This is a group that's going to make things happen. Just in that first meeting we created a plan for next steps. We need to work

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together or else we're not going to get things done in time to make a difference for our kids today. This is critical in order to keep up with the rate of diagnosis."

Ann Monahan, director of operations at the HOPE Group, says the primary goal of the coalition is to help individuals with autism. "The reality is we are a much stronger force when we are all together, and the truth is there is such a need for these services and no one agency can fill all the need there is," she adds. "I really appreciated all of the parents, the advocates, the pediatricians, the dad groups who showed up. I was blown away. For them to walk in a say, 'I want to help,' it was truly amazing."

#### LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

SARRC Public Policy Director Holly Baumann, who has been overseeing nearly all aspects of the

The Arizona Autism Coalition mapped out a strategy for engagement at its initial meeting.

coalition, was instrumental in organizing the meetings and securing funding that will keep the coalition going for the next two years. The Lodestar Foundation will fund \$70,000 over the two years as long as the coalition secures \$25,000 from additional funding sources in year two.

"What we want to do is work within the system to change the system," Baumann says. "We want people who represent state agencies to participate so we can improve the process without having to go to the legislature."

She adds, "The coalition is going to facilitate improved communication and define best practices so there is a clear line between what should be covered and what services children should receive." ▶



## Meet Jessica Lewis

The Arizona Autism Coalition, recently launched by 12 stakeholder organizations including SARRC, selected Jessica Lewis as the coalition coordinator and its first employee. Lewis will be responsible for overseeing the coalition's outreach and communications efforts and managing growth as its members work to increase capacity within the state for children and adults with ASDs.

Lewis has a bachelor's degree in communication from Arizona State University and grew up in Arizona; however, she recently spent five years in California before returning to Arizona in July 2007. She brings a wealth of skills in event planning, budgeting, strategic planning, administrative support, as well as knowledge of autism and the successes experienced in California. Lewis has two children, Elijah, 3 years, and Sadie, 14 months. Elijah was diagnosed with autism in California at age 16 months.