

**Regional Autism Assistance Program
Expert Panel Meeting
November 11, 2025, 9 AM – 11 PM
Via Zoom**

Name	Organization/Role Representing	Attended
Megan Abramski	Division of Aging and Disability Services, Iowa Department of Health and Human Services	
Alyson Beytien	Beyond Behavior, Family Member	
Josh Cobbs	Autism Speaks, Family Member	
Amy Chebuhar	Iowa Department of Health and Human Services, Family Member	x
Vanessa Curtis	Child Health Specialty Clinics, Division of Child and Community Health, University of Iowa Stead Family Pediatrics	
Allison Drew	Regional Autism Assistance Program, Family Member	
Kristin Hanson	Axis Therapy Centers	x
Erika Hertel	Regional Autism Assistance Program, Family Member	x
Michelle Holst	Iowa Department of Human Services, 1st Five	
Andrea Keith	Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services	
Vanessa Kimm	Center for Disabilities and Development, University of Iowa Stead Family Children's Hospital, Family Member	
Monica Kurtz	Grant Wood Area Education Agency	x
Caroline Moniza	Mercy Family Counseling	
Steve Muller	Balance Autism	
Kelly Pelzel	ChildServe	x
Jillian Reiher	Center for Disabilities and Development, University of Iowa Stead Family Children's Hospital	x
Samantha Cermak	ChildServe	x
Erin Enyart	Autism Society of Iowa, Family Member	x
Wendy Trotter	Iowa Department of Education	
Maria Valdovinos	Drake University	x
Brad Zelinger	Stride Autism Centers	

Welcome (Facilitator: Erika Hertel)
Introductions

Member Updates, Iowa's Autism Strategic Plan Progress

Member Update (Erika Hertel, Regional Autism Assistance Program)

- Continue to work to serve all of the referrals that are coming in.
- With level funding for many years and increased costs, may need to reevaluate who we serve and how to prioritize needs. Most of our budget is dedicated to salaries and there is no room to increase family navigator hours to support. Maintenance will be a concern in future years without additional funding or grants.

Member Update (Jillian Reiher, Center for Disabilities and Development)

- Mentioned last time onboarding new developmental pediatrician, Dr. Fernanda Marques, who is up and running and onboarding a new Physician's Assistant. Both of them will do some autism evaluations.
- Post Doctoral fellow is up and running as well.
- Both other psychologists out, one on maternity leave and one on medical leave.
- Trying to prioritize who is seen to do the most good.

Member Update (Kristin Hanson, Axis Therapy Centers)

- Urbandale location is now up and running as of last month.
- Axis is taking over MAC Midwest in Clear Lake as of December 1. They did not want to renew their lease and stay in Iowa. Axis will be taking over in Clear Lake.

Member Update (Erin Enyart, Autism Society of Iowa)

- Just held Fall Conference on 10/24.
 - Kerry Magro was keynote speaker.
 - Variety of breakout sessions.
 - ~150 in attendance.
 - Benefit auction that night, how stay funded for year.
- Sensory friendly movies, other events coming up.
- Two part-time staff, very busy.
- Receiving a lot of phone calls with questions about SNAP, Medicaid changes, and the government shutdown.

Member Update (Amy Chebuhar, Iowa Department of Health and Human Services)

- Not a lot of updates. Just started new contract year with Title V contractors.
- Asked if anyone had been in contact with her connection with Medicaid Program Policy Managers at Iowa HHS to share denial issues. Offered to help further.

Member Update (Monica Kurtz, Grant Wood Area Education Agency)

- No further updates
- Team couldn't attend ASI conference. Don't have any more professional attendance days, need to go through approval requirements for professional development, time off.
- Very busy, lots of kids.
- Serving a lot of English Language Learner (ELL) students, families, teams challenge to help support.

Member Update (Kelly Pelzel, ChildServe)

- Quad Cities location on pause.
- Related to the shutdown, working on how things will be designated as things changeover in Johnston location, with their designation of becoming a hospital.
- Can't go forward not knowing how to budget, no opening date.
- Sibshops- first went well, another coming up in Coralville, UI therapeutic rec. students helping, will send flyer.

Member Update (Samantha Cermak, ChildServe)

- Des Moines location still on track, will be opening 2026.
- ChildServe becoming Pediatric Specialty Hospital designation.

Member Update (Maria Valdovinos, Drake University)

- Drake looking at ways to increase engagement with the community and enrollment of students in programs.
- Looking at other avenues to provide educational opportunities.
- Department of Labor has initiative aimed at increasing direct support professionals, apprenticeship programs they are developing/funding.
- Looking at if they could do this at Drake for direct support care for people with intellectual disabilities.
- Have platform community partners interested in hiring Drake undergrads can use to promote job opportunities.
- Study recruitment not great.
 - Reached out to organizations working with young children. After focus groups with Emergency Department Medical Teams, found it isn't young kids but older kids seeking care.
 - Reached out to Des Moines area middle school principals asked if they would share study information, compensation of \$25/hour-2 hours, need 10 caregivers.
 - Caregiver/parent/guardian of child with autism/intellectual disability/ both visited ER for support for behavioral crisis.
 - Planning to conduct focus groups with care providers and family members of people with autism to discuss experience with emergency departments.
 - Started recruiting one group of providers that work in Emergency Departments.
 - Will also conduct a group with families/primary caregivers.
 - Small grant; will start in Des Moines area, collecting pilot data. Hoping to later expand.
 - Providing families with compensation of \$25 per hour with gift card.
 - If anyone is interested, Maria can forward the language of the study.

Member Update (Brad Zelinger, Stride), shared by Erika Hertel on Brad's behalf

- Stride recently opened our second Des Moines clinic, located in the Park Fair Mall in the Highland Park area. We are also close to finalizing a location in West Des Moines, with an anticipated opening date in Q1 2026.
- Regarding authorizations, we have been working with CASP, Molina, and Total Care to address current trends. CASP recently distributed a survey to providers, which will be used to inform the state and MCOs about the limitations placed on providers for delivering medically necessary care.

Advocacy

- What advocacy priorities have been identified and who is working on them?
 - Erin Enyart- Autism Society of Iowa Day on the Hill is scheduled for January 27
 - Reserved entire rotunda and invited agencies to set tables up at no cost, 10 additional tables for vendors, and 2 left.
 - Axis, ChildServe, RAP, quite a few Des Moines area ABA clinics signed up.
 - United front for legislation, a lot of us working on same things.
 - Autism Speaks has lobbyist, Autism Society of Iowa doesn't.
 - Main focus- ABA added to Hawki, didn't pass last year.
 - Parents asking about expanding host homes to allow parents to be host home providers.
 - Work Without Worry.
 - Iowa Autism Council was one of the boards that was ended in June
 - Developed priorities for moving forward.
 - Could use these for advocacy.
 - Council of Autism Service Providers (CASP), conducting survey on ABA denials or partial authorizations and reductions in authorized hours without individualized clinical justification for under Iowa Medicaid. January-June, June to present. Providers asked to complete survey by Thursday, November 20.

- Mariel Fernandez, CASP Iowa Special Advocacy group, looking at Tricare
- Iowa DD Council shared social media post stating the Iowa state legislature requested feedback on how Iowa's Medicaid system is working for those it serves. Anyone denied Medicaid services by an Iowa Managed Care Organization asked to complete a survey by November 19.
- There are changes happening that may explain some of the denials providers are seeing, how organizations have structured their businesses, when building certified was it hospital/day care regulations when building certified, clinical vs. community setting. Shared resources in chat:
 - <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/idahos-evolution-autism-services-steven-merahn-md-au53c/>
 - https://www.linkedin.com/posts/stevenmerahn_reaba-centers-and-day-care-designations-activity-7393797119217872896-3o11/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop&rcm=ACoAAABUwKUBsyOvi-uWJc5ye4enyU1kuKehyo
- What are the latest insurance authorization requirements for ABA and other therapies? Has progress been made with reducing barriers?
 - Parent stated that there is a new Medicaid rule that, in-order for a child to attend ABA (be covered) they must have had a “psychological” evaluation within the last 5 years. She is concerned because she now needs to seek out a re-evaluation and is concerned about the wait times.
 - Requirements are coming from MCOs.
 - Denials if more than 5 years since initial assessment.
 - Would need autism-specific diagnostic tool.
 - May be some other measures that would suffice.
 - Is there a way for providers to prioritize appointments, quick visit.
 - Helps if able to see same provider, intake interview and measure.
 - May start with med. provider vs. psychologist and get in sooner.
 - Be clear- coach families to be as clear as possible about what they want, say they need updated CARS testing for ABA when calling.

Discussion

- Monica Kurtz shared that they are seeing more and more needs in the area of autism for English Language Learners (ELL) families. Are there statewide resources, interventions and people that we can tap into to increase our knowledge and skills on how to support these families learn about autism, interventions for the home? What supports are available in your agency or community?
 - Not just Spanish, a lot of students from variety of other countries.
 - Different cultural views of autism, understanding of what autism is.
 - Haven't had a lot of exposure or training in that area.
 - AEA able to translate materials, have an interpreter from an outside provider.
 - How to support families outside of IEP meeting.
 - Kelly Pelzel suggested this could be a possible Autism Society of Iowa Lunch & Learn
 - Jillian Reiher suggested Dr. Amy Esler, Minnesota, works with Somalian population
 - Kelly Pelzel has been in contact with her and could reach out for more information.
 - ChildServe tried a French support group that didn't work out and not enough people attended
 - RAP has materials in French, other languages
 - Erika Hertel shared Autism Basics series done in Spanish has struggled to build attendance. It has been suggested we offer it in French, but it is a heavy lift if that isn't the best way to get information to families
 - Jillian Reiher said if someone had capacity, it would be nice to be able to ask families what their community needs, what we can do to support
 - Kelly Pelzel said families love RAP materials in French and are glad they are available, could expand languages available
 - Monica said it would be helpful for the AEA to list the languages/cultures in the communities they are supporting and find out if there are people in the community who might be able to help

- Jillian Reiher shared sometimes pulling back on diagnostics and approaching it from what is hard for your child, speech, toilet training, behaviors, etc.
- Share if aware of community partners, Cedar Rapids Ladd Library may be asset Sharon Rettinger and Brittney Magsamen, CHSC, working with group in Waterloo to help African families complete paperwork for autism evaluations.

Meeting adjourned at 10:00 AM.