

# Bill to provide funds into study of autism

A little more than 14 years ago, on Sept. 13, 1997, Bobbie and Billy Gallagher, residents of Brick Township with two small children with autism, walked into their congressman's office looking for help. That is when the sustained federal effort to combat autism commenced, according to a press release from Congressman Chris Smith (R-NJ).

"Today when people are losing faith with government, just fed up with bureaucracy, this is a success story," Billy Gallagher said on Sept. 29 as he stood with Smith at the congressman's Ocean County office — along with several other grassroots advocates, parents and children with autism — to mark passage of Smith's bill (HR 2005, the Combating Autism Reauthorization Act of 2011), a milestone achievement in the ongoing struggle to enhance diagnosis, early intervention, and one day a cure for autism.

On Sept. 29, President Barack Obama signed Smith's bill into law. The law authorizes \$693 million over the next three years for autism research, early intervention and education.

"Bobbie and Billy Gallagher brought a focus to the issue of autism and the needs of autistic children that was simply missing at the federal level. Armed with data and their own research, they helped me win approval of a landmark federal study and the enactment of legislation in 2000 — Autism Statistics, Surveillance, Research and Epidemiology Act — to create a comprehensive federal program to combat autism," said Smith, who is the founding co-chairman of the bipartisan Autism Caucus in the House of Representatives, the Coalition on Autism Research and Education (CARE).

"Our children were 5 and 6 when we first came here. Now they are 19 and 20, and they have their struggles, but they have been helped by the research programs and other efforts supported and sustained by Congressman Smith," said Bobbie Gallagher.

"Chris Smith took care of a problem with my GI bill benefits, and I never expected to see him again, but then we got involved in autism," said Gary Weitzen, executive director of Parents of Autistic Children (POAC), "and he has always been

there for us. The autism symbol is a puzzle piece because we don't understand it, and reauthorization of this legislation is the only way to get there."

In a moving and encouraging moment, Christopher Weitzen, who at one time did  
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not speak at all, read a statement, "I am 17 years old and I have autism. I want to thank Chris Smith. Thank you for helping kids just like me. Kids who want to learn. Kids who want to be healthy. We are asking the President to help now. Thank you and good night."

As signed into law at a small ceremony in the Oval Office, Smith's Combating Autism Reauthorization Act authorizes for each of the next three fiscal years:

- \$22 million for the developmental disabilities surveillance and research program;
- \$48 million for autism education, early detection, and intervention;
- \$161 million for hundreds of research grants at the National Institutes of Health, and for the Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee.

"We serve 28,000 developmentally disabled persons in New Jersey, 50 percent of whom have autism," said Liza Gundell, deputy director of Autism Family Services. "All three components of this bill are necessary to help better the lives of people with autism."

Dr. Linda Meyer, executive director, AutismNJ, recognized Smith's decades-long work on autism and related issues, adding, "You have been a commanding voice in Washington; this is a marathon and you've been in it for the long haul."

Smith noted that often individuals with autism suffer from co-occurring medical conditions, such as unusually high rates of infection and gastrointestinal problems, and that the nation needs to do more research on why these conditions occur at higher rates in those with autism. He also discussed the problem of large numbers of children with autism aging out of the school systems and becoming adults, and the need to provide services, such as assistance with employment and housing.

"About 1 in 110 children nationally and 1 in 94 in New Jersey have an autism spectrum disorder — totaling 1.5 million indi-



viduals in the United States, including hundreds of thousands of adults," said Smith. "There is a consensus that an all-out, sustained commitment is needed to ensure these individuals have access to the treatments and services they need to live up to their potential throughout their lives, and that HR 2005 is absolutely necessary to keep us moving forward, rather than backsliding on our progress."