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As CDC Issues New Autism Prevalence Report, Autism Speaks Asks, "What Will It Take?" for Government to Meet the Challenge of this National Health Crisis

Leading National Advocacy Organization Calls for Dramatic Increase in Federal Funding for Research and Services

NEW YORK, N.Y. (December 18, 2009) – In the wake of today's new report from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) stating that autism now affects 1 in every 110 American children, Autism Speaks, the nation's largest autism science and advocacy organization, called on the federal government to immediately step up its efforts – and dramatically increase funding – to address the growing national autism public health crisis.

"Now that the government has confirmed that one percent of American children have autism, the question becomes what it will take to get our elected leaders to wake up and take on this crisis in an appropriate way," said Bob Wright, co-founder of Autism Speaks. "Must we wait until every member of Congress has a child or grandchild with autism, or until every household is impacted by this devastating disorder? With nearly 750,000 children on the autism spectrum, we need meaningful action now that acknowledges the scope of this problem and allocates the resources necessary to take the fight against autism to a new level. We cannot expect the millions of people impacted by this crisis to wait another 20 years for answers."

The CDC report, published in this week's *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* (MMWR), states that 1% or 1 in every 110 children has been diagnosed with autism, including 1 in 70 boys. This represents a staggering 57 percent increase from 2002 to 2006, and a 600 percent increase in just the past 20 years. Other significant findings include that a broader definition of ASDs does not account for the increase, and while improved and earlier diagnosis accounts for some of the increase, it does not fully account for the increase. Thus, a true increase in the risk for ASD cannot be ruled out. Even though parents typically express concerns about their child's developmental progress before age three, the average age of diagnoses is not until 53 months, although diagnoses are occurring earlier than found in the 2002 study. The report uses the same methodology that produced the CDC's 2007 prevalence findings of 1 in 150 children with autism.

"This study provides strong evidence that the prevalence of autism spectrum disorder is, in fact, dramatically increasing," said Geraldine Dawson, Ph.D., Autism Speaks chief science officer, who noted that recent research indicates that a significant amount of the increase in autism prevalence cannot be explained by better, broader or earlier diagnosis. "It is imperative that the federal government, primarily through the National Institutes of Health and CDC, quickly and significantly increase funding for autism research. We have learned a lot about autism during the past five years. However, most of the critical questions about the factors that cause the many manifestations of autism – and how we can better treat this disorder – remain unanswered."

"The CDC numbers validate what we already know: We have a major public health emergency on our hands that is taking an enormous toll on millions of families across the country," said Autism Speaks President Mark Roithmayr. "These families want answers that can only come through further research. They also desperately want access to services that are, at this point, grossly inadequate to meet the current and growing needs of people with autism. That must change quickly, before our society becomes overwhelmed by the demand for these services in the coming years and decades."

According to a 2007 Harvard School of Public Health study, it costs approximately \$35 billion each year to care for people with autism – a number that has clearly increased over the past 2 years with the rising prevalence among the youngest people with ASD and a growing demand for housing, work skills and opportunities, healthcare, and other services that simply do not exist for adults with ASD. In FY 2008, total federal spending on autism research was just \$177 million, expected to increase to \$282 million in FY 2009 – only because of a one-time infusion of \$89 million in stimulus spending.

"During his campaign, President Obama committed to \$1 billion of annual federal spending on autism by 2012. In October, he identified autism as one of his administration's top three public health priorities. This new prevalence data must compel Congress to take action to fulfill the President's promise in the upcoming FY 2011 budget process," said Wright. "It is also vital that any healthcare reform legislation sent by Congress to the President must include – as both the current House and Senate versions do – an end to insurance marketplace discrimination against people with autism by requiring insurers to deliver coverage for behavioral health treatments."

"There are too many children with autism who are being diagnosed at six, seven or even eight years of age, which is far too late for them to experience the maximum benefits of early intervention services," said Dawson. "Clearly, we need to do a better job of diagnosing children as early as possible – ideally by age two. We know that early intervention can make a critical difference in a child's outcome."

Autism Speaks has committed more than \$131 million to date to fund research into the causes, diagnosis and treatment for autism through 2014. It is currently funding research into potential genetic and environmental factors involved with autism, as well as improved methods of early diagnosis and new treatment models. Read more about Autism Speaks' science portfolio [here](#).

See a graph of the increase in prevalence over the years [here](#) (PDF). See media coverage of the new CDC prevalence numbers [here](#).

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About Autism

Autism is a complex biological condition that affects a person's ability to communicate and develop social relationships, and is often accompanied by behavioral challenges. A 2009 report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) stated that autism spectrum disorders are diagnosed in one in 110 or 1% of all children in the United States, affecting four times as many boys as girls. It is estimated that 1.5 million Americans have an autism spectrum disorder. The CDC has called autism a national public health crisis for which we still need effective treatments and whose causes need to be better understood.

About Autism Speaks

Autism Speaks is the nation's largest autism science and advocacy organization, dedicated to funding research into the causes, diagnosis, treatments and a cure for autism; increasing awareness of autism spectrum disorders; and advocating for the needs of individuals with autism and their families. To learn more about Autism Speaks, please visit www.autismspeaks.org.

About the Co-Founders

Autism Speaks was founded in February 2005 by Suzanne and Bob Wright, the grandparents of a child with autism. Bob Wright is Senior Advisor at Lee Equity Partners and served as vice chairman, General Electric, and chief executive officer of NBC and NBC Universal for more than twenty years. He also serves on the board of directors of the Polo Ralph Lauren Corporation and RAND Corporation and the New York Presbyterian Hospital Board of Trustees. Suzanne Wright has an extensive history of active involvement in community and philanthropic endeavors, mostly directed toward helping children. She serves on the boards of several non-profit organizations and is also Trustee Emeritus of Sarah Lawrence College, her alma mater. In 2008, the Wrights were named to the *Time* 100 list of the most influential people in the world for their commitment to global autism advocacy.

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