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New Hampshire LEND Program Receives \$600,000 For Autism Training

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DURHAM, N.H. - The New Hampshire Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities (LEND) program, a collaborative graduate program of Dartmouth Medical School and the Institute on Disability (IOD) and the College of Health and Human Services at the University of New Hampshire, has received a \$600,000 grant to expand and focus on interdisciplinary training related to early identification and intervention of autism spectrum disorders (ASD). This grant, received as part of approximately \$5.6 million in funds distributed by the Health Resources and Services Administration to a total of 21 universities and research organizations, will support the newly-created New Hampshire Leadership Education in Autism Spectrum Disorders (NH LEASD) Program.

In collaboration with the Center for Medical Home Improvement, the NH LEASD Program will work toward assuring that children with ASD in N.H. and northern New England are screened and diagnosed before the age of 18 months to guarantee access to early intervention, family-centered care, and maximal developmental outcomes. Over the course of the three-year expansion project, a total of 132 interdisciplinary professionals in primary health care, allied health, and education fields will enhance their knowledge, skills, and leadership abilities to provide services, including screening, diagnosis, assessment, and evidence-based interventions, to individuals with ASD and their families in the community.

This initiative will also work toward creating a sustainable ASD Leadership Network comprised of state and regional interdisciplinary health care and early intervention professionals who are knowledgeable about evidence-based practices that improve the health and well-being of children with or at risk for ASD.

"With the recent release of the N.H. Commission on Autism Spectrum Disorders Report, the funding of the NH LEASD Program is quite timely," noted Rae Sonnenmeier, NH LEND interdisciplinary training director and a clinical assistant professor at the IOD. "These funds will allow us to work closely with state agencies to develop a highly qualified work force to serve young children with or at-risk for ASD and their families. Current data suggests that one in 150 children is diagnosed with ASD. There is a high level of need in the community, and this program moves us closer to narrowing the gaps that currently exist between what we know from research and what we currently practice."

The resources for the increased focus on ASD are the result of the Combating Autism Act (CAA) of 2006. The CAA provides additional resources over the coming three years for research, screening, treatment, and education related to ASD and other developmental disabilities. The CAA also has a provision to expand existing interdisciplinary training opportunities and to increase the number of interdisciplinary training programs that prepare professionals to diagnose or rule out individuals with ASD or other developmental disabilities.

The funds are awarded to expand currently existing LEND programs and develop new LENDs in states that do not have such a program.

The New Hampshire LEND program provides interdisciplinary leadership training to those who wish to enhance their knowledge and skills in working with children with neurodevelopmental disabilities or special health care needs and their families. Training experiences are individually designed to provide future leaders in multiple fields of study with evidence-based training in prevention and treatment of neurodevelopmental disabilities, human development, consumer perspectives, family-centered practice, health policy, cultural competence, principles of systems change, leadership development, community services, school and community inclusion, collaborative teamwork, and service coordination.

The Institute on Disability at the University of New Hampshire was established in 1987 to provide a coherent university-based focus for the improvement of knowledge, policies, and practices related to the lives of persons with disabilities and their families. Its mission is to advance policies and systems changes, promising practices, education, and research that strengthen communities to ensure full access, equal opportunities, and participation for all persons.

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