

Hello, I'm Jacquie Benestante and I'm the spouse of an Austin Firefighter and a mother of a child with autism. We are on the City of Austin health benefit plan, which opts out of covering the most effective treatment for autism, Applied Behavior Analysis, also known as ABA.

For the last 5 years we've appealed to Human Resources to cover this critical therapy for our son, but our appeals have been denied. Today I am here to inform Council about the need for ABA and advocate for families who work for the city. We are asking that the most effective and evidence based autism treatment, Applied Behavior Analysis, be included in the City Of Austin Health Plan beginning in 2016.

I'd like to thank Council Member Delia Garza for offering to take the lead on this and bring the issue to the Health & Human Services Committee, and then to Council for your consideration.

Our son was diagnosed at age 2 ½ by a Pediatric Neurologist and he was given prescriptions for Speech, Occupational Therapy, and ABA.

our son had intense noise sensitivity

sensory issues,

severe meltdowns

tantrums for seemingly no reason, that included head banging.

acute anxiety about being out of my sight,

he was petrified of public bathrooms,

banged his head on the floor until it almost bled,

threw his body into everything,

and bit me repeatedly.

To say things were challenging would be a gross understatement. We started working with an ABA therapist, never thinking it wouldn't be covered by our insurance.

ABA therapy turned all of our lives around in a very short amount of time.

We all worked piece by piece to overcome his most debilitating challenges, and today, he is successfully navigating life as a 4th grader with autism. He's in a regular classroom in a local public school, and has friends.

The skills and abilities he has been taught in ABA are evident everyday.

He is able to tell us how he feels, control his emotions, and advocate for himself. None of this would be possible without the aid of this critical therapy.

We have made many sacrifices to afford his care. But when you have a child with autism, you want the best treatment, as you would with any other illness.

ABA therapy is now considered National Best Practice. Numerous organizations have conducted studies proving the effectiveness, and fully endorse ABA, such as:

The American Academy of Pediatrics

National Institute of Mental Health

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

And the US Surgeon General, just to name a few.

The cost of adding ABA to our Health Benefit Plan is minimal.

Autism Speaks has reported the actual costs over a 3 year period have been shockingly lower than projected costs. Data from three state government health plans, that added ABA, show the projected cost was up to 1,261% less than originally predicted.

Data from 6 states, over 3 years, shows the average cost was 46 cents per member per month.

Almost 40% of self-funded insurance plans are now covering ABA treatment voluntarily. Locally, this includes Austin ISD, because as an organization that knows children, they realize it's the right thing to do for their employees.

I know the City of Austin strives to improve quality of life for its employees. As of last September, 17 children on the City of Austin Health Plan were identified as having autism.

I'd like to ask that Council consider adding this life changing benefit for families like ours. It is long over due. The cost is minimal, and the gains are huge. Thank you.