


Aspire to expand services

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By JANE MICHAELS jmichaels@pioneerlocal.com

An increase in children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder through improved identification of symptoms has led the Aspire agency to expand services.

The Westchester-based network serving 50 surrounding communities plans to offer three areas of expanded service, beginning in the summer, said Kathy Ruffulo, vice president of children's services.

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"Based on what we were seeing as the needs of the community and what parents were telling me, we wanted to offer more," Ruffulo said. "Parents are saying they want to be more

educated, and they want more social opportunities for their children."

In 2002, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported an average of one of every 150 children in the U.S. has autism, a developmental disorder with a wide range of symptoms and conditions noted by problems communicating and connecting with others.

Someone with autism also may have unusual, repetitive or narrow interests and activities, as well as sensitivity to light, sound or tactile stimuli. At the other end of the spectrum, those with Asperger's syndrome are highly intelligent, but have difficulty in social situations.

A 2007 CDC study based on parent surveys showed one in 91 children, or 1 percent of the U.S. population, has some form of autism.

In response, Aspire sought and received a grant in January from a foundation wishing to remain anonymous, Ruffulo said.

The agency, serving 1,000 children and adults with various developmental disabilities in addition to autism, plans to offer more social skills programs and group activities for children with autism and sensory-related disorders.

Aspire also intends to build up a parent support network and a library of family resources, including books for siblings of autistic children.

The agency also is developing an assisted technology program with a range of devices from weighted pencils to facilitate handwriting, to computers which can augment communication.

"Kids with autism are visual learners," Ruffulo said. "There are some sophisticated pieces of technology we're going to investigate, like using iPods visually to communicate."

The new offerings will incorporate the agency's family-centered focus, Ruffulo said. For example, parents and siblings generally attend clients' therapy sessions, so that everyone is familiar with goals and techniques and how to practice them at home.

"Everyone is welcome and educated at Aspire. We truly embrace the whole family," she said. "Sometimes people forget about the siblings, but we have activities for them."

It's important to include siblings who sometimes feel left out and uninformed, Ruffulo said.

"Sometimes when a child with special needs is having a meltdown in a grocery store or wherever, the brothers and sisters want to know how to respond to that and build their own coping skills," she said.

"That's important because to me, the brothers and sisters are the future advocates of special needs children and adults," she said.