

Autism Awareness Day brings state officials, parents together

By Jeffery Kurz
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HARTFORD — For years, Connecticut was the only state that provided no services for adults with autism who did not have mental retardation. That began to change six years ago, and every year since Autism Awareness Day has drawn parents and lawmakers to the Capitol to celebrate progress and talk about what still needs to be accomplished.

"I'm honored by the progress that we've made in the last six years, but our work is not done," said state Rep. Catherine F. Abercrombie, D-Meriden. In recent years, Abercrombie has championed autism-related initiatives and supported legislation that improves services for the autism population.

Progress includes the expansion of a pilot program, started in 2006, that helps adults with autism develop social skills and inde-

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pendent living skills, and approval of a

Medicaid waiver for adults with an autism spectrum disorder. The task now is to get federal approval and funding for the waiver.

About 100 people, including several lawmakers, crammed in to an upstairs room of the Capitol for the event Wednesday morning. Along with Abercrombie, autism-related initiatives have received considerable backing by House Speaker Christopher G. Donovan, D-Meriden.

"I believe it really gives families hope to know people are up here like Donovan and Abercrombie, who are really fighting for it every day," said Lois Rosenwald, executive director of the Wallingford-based Connecticut Autism Spectrum Resource Center.

"When I first started, nobody was listening to us," said Rosenwald.

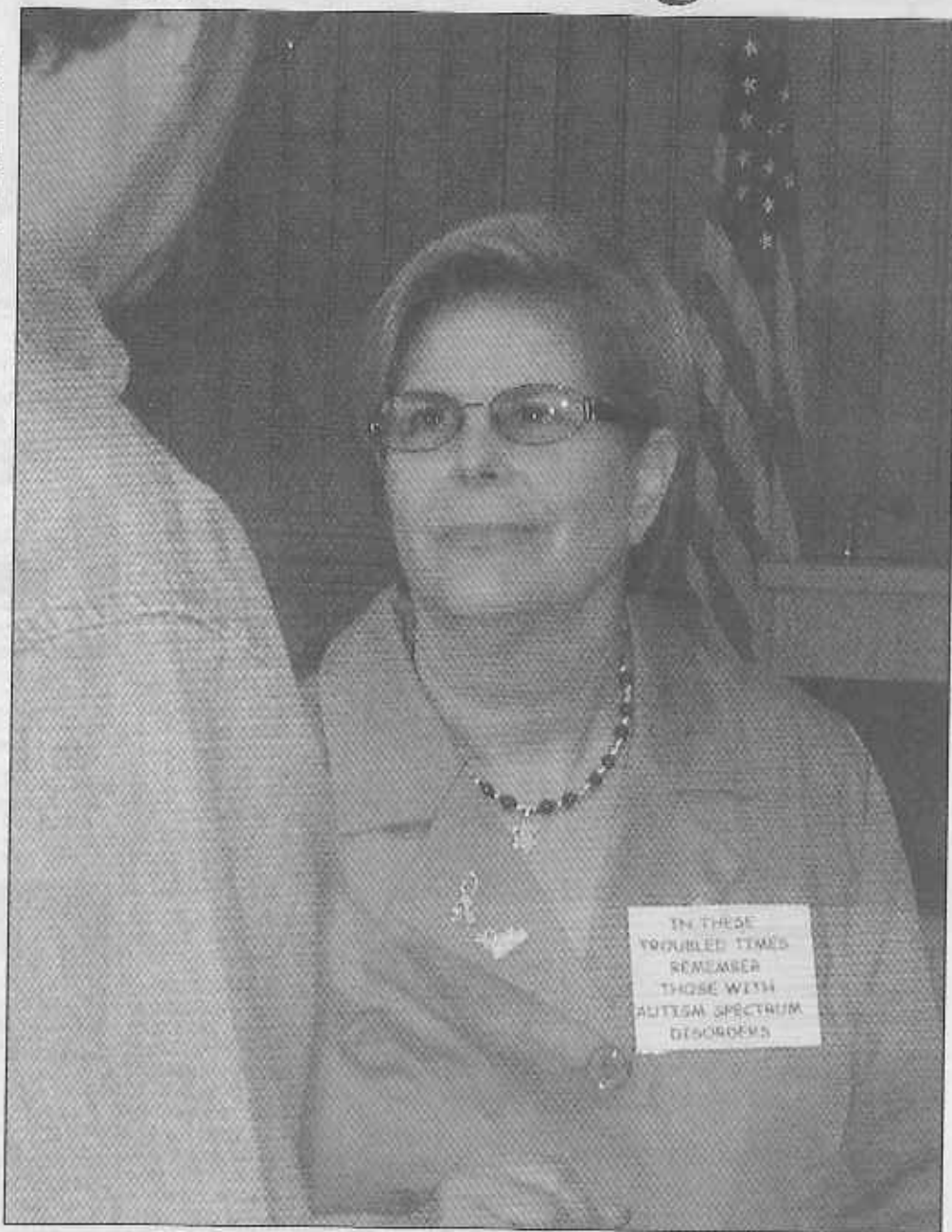
There are several organizations throughout Connecticut that support families affected by autism, which is a family of disorders, generally referred to as the autism spectrum, that includes Asperger's syndrome. Those organizations are typically headed by those with a personal connection to the disorder. Rosenwald, for example, has an adult son with autism.

"Once you become an adult and you don't see an agency there is nowhere to go and you're off the face of the earth," she said.

Brita Darany von Regensburg, president of Greenwich-based Friends of Autistic People Inc., said she had to give up her job as an interior decorator because caring for her daughter became a full-time job after her daughter died at 21. In her speech to the audience, Rosenwald mentioned reading a recent news story about a mother who prayed that her adult son would die before she did, because otherwise there would be no one to care for him.

"No parent should have to live with that kind of worry over the years," she said.

"My wish is that mothers pray to die before their children," said Rosenwald.



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Lois Rosenwald, executive director of the Wallingford-based Connecticut Autism Spectrum Resource Center, talks with an attendee of Tuesday's Autism Awareness Day gathering at the Capitol.

Special recognition was given Tuesday to the Walgreen Co. distribution center in Windsor, where a large number of employees are people with disabilities. The aim is to have a third of all employees there be those with disabilities. There is also a small center of the applied Behavior Analysis certification to work with students of autism in state school districts. Another bill would offer tax credits to businesses that make jobs accessible to employees with autism spectrum disorders.

work and loading trucks, said Scott Sylvester, distribution center manager. It's a Walgreens company-wide initiative, spearheaded by a vice president who has a son with autism, said Sylvester. Those with autism are often of normal or high intelligence, but lack social skills most people take for granted.

"It's not so much what the numbers are as in raising awareness," said Sylvester. "We all have something to bring to the table."