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Letter from NP John Gage to OPM Director Kay Coles James

The Honorable Kay Coles James
Director, Office of Personnel Management
1900 E Street, NW, Room 5A09
Washington , DC 20415

Dear Director James:

I am writing to bring to your attention a serious gap in health insurance coverage under the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program (FEHBP) that we believe is in your power to rectify. Currently, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) neither directs nor encourages participating carriers to provide insurance coverage for Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA), the therapy that is recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics, the National Research Council, and the Surgeon General's Office as the most effective and most promising for children with autism.

While some categories of coverage under FEHBP are addressed in statute, others have gained inclusion through OPM's annual "call letter" to carriers that provides guidelines and instructions regarding the coverage OPM wants carriers to include in their benefits packages. Because the issue is so compelling and time is of the essence for so many families with a child suffering from autism, I am writing to ask you to ask FEHBP's carriers to include ABA therapy in their benefits packages for the rest of this contract year, and for all future years. ABA therapy can and should be treated similarly to occupational therapy, and for health maintenance organizations (HMOs) and preferred provider organizations (PPOs); allowances should be made for out-of-network providers if no ABA providers are included among their existing network of providers.

The incidence of autism in children is expanding rapidly, possibly by virtue of improved diagnosis, and possibly due to other factors. It is imperative for federal employees who have a young child stricken with autism to have available the most effective treatment possible at the most efficacious moment. Applied Behavioral Analysis, which is an intensive, one-on-one therapeutic approach to autism, is most effective when begun at an early age, and made available to the child for the appropriate period of time which is often 20 to 40 hours per week.

There is tremendous urgency to the issue of gaining FEHBP coverage for the ABA treatment for autistic children. Some insurance company advocates who argue against health insurance coverage for the treatment of autism say that it is the responsibility of public schools to treat autistic children. However, autism is recognized as a neurological disease, and ABA therapy is most effective in very young children and toddlers whose brains are most susceptible to improvement through intensive therapeutic treatment. The stakes are extremely high for autistic children and their families. Not only does ABA therapy at an early age hold the promise of higher functioning throughout the autistic child's life, but it is also extremely cost-effective, in that ABA's success can translate into lower costs for treatments and other health care later in life.

As an employer, the federal government will also reap benefits from asking FEHBP carriers to cover the ABA treatment for autistic children. Federal employees whose children suffer from autism must address their children's needs. If their health insurance does not cover the cost of the ABA therapy that is their children's only hope, what options are left to them? If they leave federal employment for a position with an employer that does cover the treatment of autism, the government loses its human capital investment, represented by that employee's training, experience, and skill accumulated on the job. Agencies also lose out if the employee leaves to take care of the autistic child himself because treatment is unaffordable. The cost to the autistic child of treatment not received is incalculable.

I urge you in the strongest possible terms to take action immediately to ensure that FEHBP carriers cover Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) for autistic children. Such coverage gives autistic children their only chance for a normal life, and the federal employees who are parents of autistic children their only chance to make an ongoing career of federal service. Please contact Jacqueline Simon of AFGE's Public Policy Department at 202-639-6408 if you have any further questions about ABA and our union's request.

Sincerely yours,
John Gage
National President

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