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California City Solutions: Temecula Forms Collaborative Partnership to Provide Resources for Autism and Special Needs

This story is part of an ongoing series featuring Helen Putnam Award entries. The 2014 entries are available on the League's website as a resource for cities in a searchable database called [California City Solutions](#). Temecula's Southwest Riverside Autism Task Force was submitted in 2014 for the CCS Partnership Intergovernmental Collaboration award category.

The city of Temecula has an increasing number of children with special needs. Population rates within the school districts of Temecula and Lake Elsinore have increased dramatically during the last five years. Realizing the need to provide solutions and resources for these children became a larger concern and prompted public leaders in Southwest Riverside County to form a task force in 2010. Today the task force provides a guidebook, roadmap of services available and incorporates inclusionary activities and education in all of its city youth centered events and programs.

Autism is a complex developmental brain disorder which generally appears in the first three years of life and causes impairments in a person's ability to communicate and socially interact. After seeing the alarming statistics from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) in 2010 that 1 in 88 people are diagnosed with autism, the Temecula City Council came together to address the epidemic and formed the Southwest Riverside Autism Task Force (SRATF).

A more recent CDC study released March 20, 2013 found that 1 in 50 school-aged children are now diagnosed with autism. While there is no medical detection or known cure for autism, thousands of children have shown significant improvement resulting from early diagnosis and use of effective interventions. Provided with the proper developmental education and support, autistic children can grow into healthy and more independent adults will economically benefit society.

During a council meeting in April 2009, Temecula Council Member Mike Naggar shared his family's experience with autism following the diagnoses of his son. As a father, he had the same questions as many other families who are affected by autism, but as public figure he was a voice for a cross-jurisdictional epidemic. How can these children get the proper public education in an underfunded California school system? How can we educate the typical community (including law enforcement, peers at school, friends and family) to understand what an autistic individual cannot express? How can we best prepare autistic children and teens to function as independently as possible for adulthood? Where do parents go to find all of the various autism services that are available to them?

SRATF is a collaborative effort of multiple jurisdictions and stakeholders working together to address the growing need to provide services and programs for those affected by autism and special needs. The task force comprises elected officials from eight cities (Temecula, Murrieta, Perris, Wildomar, Lake Elsinore, Hemet, Canyon Lake and Menifee) and the county of Riverside. It taps into the expertise of the school districts, nonprofit organizations, professional and medical experts in the field of autism, as well as community feedback. Meeting every two months, the task force reviews programs, services, and resources provided through government and non-government agencies to ensure that it is providing the most current roadmap of services to its residents.

The task force:

- Assesses the availability of services currently provided through the region to help understand common screening measures, early diagnoses, and treatment options;
- Reviews current services that have been effective with providing the best practices of treatment service options;
- Reviews effectiveness and accessibility of programs and services provided to individuals and families with autism;
- Reviews concerns and issues in programming and services and how they can be readily addressed;
- Provides individuals and families a forum and platform to address concerns;
- Assesses availability of services with respect to cost, location, and types of services provided;
- Identify funding sources, social welfare programs, and fundraising opportunities;
- Locates and discuss jobs and post-secondary educational options for transitional independence;
- Raises awareness through local and countywide communities and agencies; and
- Builds partnerships with service providers, nonprofit organizations, and county and state agencies.

The objectives of the task force are continually being met by increasing public awareness of the autism disorder, publishing informational resources and enhancing or creating programs for children with special needs entering school and eventually the work force.

The task force has had a significant impact on families, the community and local business. Some of its ongoing efforts include:

- A resource guide, the "[Southwest Riverside County Special Needs Resource Guide](#)", which is available on the city's website;
- Creating a city position for an Inclusion Services Specialist;
- The "[Community Playbook - Paving the Way for Youth with Special Needs, the Roadmap to Raise Awareness](#)", intended to provide a model and roadmap on how the community's regional efforts come together;
- Creating an inclusive play structure;
- Collaboration of Our Nicholas Foundation and Inland Empire Autism Society to create the "Exceptional Diners" program for local area restaurants to provide expedited service, or call ahead seating and ordering;
- Collaboration of Our Nicholas Foundation and Inland Empire Autism Society to create the Temeku Theatre Sensory Friendly Movie Night for children and families affected by autism;
- Target Holiday Shopping for families affected by autism;
- Provide training to city staff to incorporate inclusion at all city events and programs;
- City of Temecula's Learning Enriched Autism Program;
- City of Temecula's Supporting Kids Involving Parents program;
- Inclusive youth services programs;
- Adaptive aquatic lessons;
- Inclusive College Internship Program;
- Youth Summer Employment Program;
- Post-secondary educational opportunities;
- Autism awareness workshops/seminars;
- Temecula Special Needs Resource Fair;
- 2014 viticulture program to teach youth, ages 16-22 years, about the viticulture and hospitality industry in Temecula's wine country, assisting with future employment.

SRATF welcomes members of the community who are affected by or knows someone that is affected by autism to attend meetings and provide valuable feedback that will help enhance services and resources, and hopes to become a model for other regions to replicate.
