

Autism center opens in Valley, looks for qualified personnel

By Ed Gately
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Kisha Corzo, center, case manager for the Center for Autism and Related Disorders in Phoenix, works with some of the center's young clients. Therapists Jennifer Ranick and Jessica Mitchell are at rear.

Julio Jimenez Tribune

An intensive treatment program aimed at helping children recover from autism has come to the Valley and is taking on clients. The Center for Autism and Related Disorders has opened at 48th Street and McDowell Road, and its introductory roster of clients includes families across the East Valley.

This marks the program's entry into Arizona, and future expansion across Arizona will provide employment opportunities for qualified individuals, said Dr. Doreen Granpeesheh, a Los Angeles behavior analyst who founded the center in 1990 and is its executive director.

There are numerous centers in the United States, as well as in England, Australia and New Zealand.

"We typically will start the first center in a state. It will grow to about 50 to 60 children and a staff of about 50 therapists and supervisors, and then somewhere along that line we will then split off and perhaps go to (another region in the state) and do the same thing there," she said. "The funding is very good in Arizona and the need seems to be amazingly high."

The therapy provided by the center - Applied Behavior Analysis - is "very, very sought after ... and there are sometimes waiting lists of one to two years for this type of therapy," Granpeesheh said.

Gretchen Jacobs, a legislative lobbyist and Scottsdale resident, played a big role in securing state funding to get the program here.

Her daughter was diagnosed with autism at age 2.

"The Arizona Legislature and Gov. Janet Napolitano really stepped up and showed that they want to help the families who are looking for treatment and support," Jacobs said.

The state has provided funding for the center to conduct a pilot study, and additional funding from the state Department of Economic Security's Division of Developmental Disabilities will provide any child access to the program, Granpeesheh said.

About half of the children who are diagnosed early and undergo the center's intensive therapy recover from autism, Granpeesheh said.

The program has two separate service models, one for younger children beginning at ages 2 and 3, and another for older children.

The typical "intensive behavioral intervention" includes a variety of repetitive activities and techniques, said Sarah Niehoff, managing supervisor of the Valley center.

The typical program covers 25 to 40 hours per week, she said.

"We're hoping to start about six clients next week and we're going to grow," she said.

"The sky is, hopefully, the limit. We're hoping to get about 15 clients going in the next month or two, and then take it from there."

Audra Small, a Chandler resident whose 2-year-old daughter is in the program, said she came across the center when searching for a proven and documented approach for addressing her daughter's needs.

"It means hope because there's a direct way that we can measure her success," she said.

"We can actually, quantitatively look back and see what she has accomplished, and the trends. She's doing so much differently than she was when she was first diagnosed. If you catch it early enough, you can make such a huge difference."

The biggest challenge ahead will be finding qualified people to bring on board to help the center keep up with demand for its services in Arizona, Niehoff said.

"We want people who are well-trained," she said. "As quick as we can get staff ... we're looking forward to serving more clients."

Center for Autism and Related Disorders

- Based in Los Angeles.

Treats children diagnosed with autism, Asperger's syndrome and Pervasive Developmental Disorder, Not Otherwise Specified or PDDNOS.

- Sites in Arizona, California, New York, South Carolina, Texas and Virginia, as well as in England, Australia and New Zealand.

- About 600 employees.