



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Patty Ritchie

This April, Help Spread Autism Awareness

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Senator Ritchie's Weekly Column

Over the last decade here in the United States, the number of children diagnosed with autism has more than doubled. Statistics show one out of every 68 babies are born with some form of autism, and some 3.5 million Americans live with an autism spectrum disorder.

However, we are now more capable than ever when it comes to understanding and treating those on any level of the spectrum. That is because from doctors and parents, to friends and neighbors, we are more aware of autism and the needs of those living with it.

An understanding and knowledge of autism is critically important because unfortunately, there is no true medical detection or cure. With the goal of working to accept, appreciate and help those living with autism and their families, I want to highlight World Autism Awareness Month this April.

Throughout World Autism Awareness Month, communities across the globe will hold events and engage in other efforts—like wearing the color blue, or using blue light bulbs outside homes and businesses—to raise awareness and encourage acceptance and inclusion for all.

Working toward those same goals, New York State recently created the New York State Autism Advisory Board. Its 19 members work to advise the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD) on the effectiveness of current services for those living with autism. The board also works with the state to identify changes that would help improve programs and services for those impacted by autism and their families.

I am proud to say I nominated a member of the board, Stephanie Andrews of Oswego County. A resident of Mexico, Stephanie is the mother of a teenager diagnosed with regressive autism. I have seen firsthand how Stephanie—who formerly worked in my office—has fought for rural families across Oswego County who are seeking the best possible care for their loved ones who have been diagnosed with autism. I am excited that she can now help state agencies understand what these families go through, the unique needs of Upstate and what New York needs to do to help those with autism reach their full potential.

Going hand in hand with efforts to improve services for those with autism is the need to provide loving homes for children with special needs who are waiting to be adopted. Across the country there are nearly half a million children in foster care—that includes tens of thousands who have special needs.

In light of this, I introduced legislation (S.4023-A) that would increase the number of special needs adoptions by providing parents with a \$10,000 annual tax deduction and the benefit would extend until the child's 21st birthday. Unfortunately, while this measure was previously approved by the Senate and Assembly, it ultimately was vetoed by the Governor. I am continuing to push for passage of this important legislation, which will help more of our state's special needs children find loving homes.

I truly believe that by working together to raise awareness, we can improve the lives of all New Yorkers with special needs, including those living with autism. For more information on World Autism Awareness Month, visit <https://www.autismspeaks.org/what-autism/world-autism-awareness-day>.