



**The *Agency for Workforce Innovation* is Florida's lead state workforce agency directly administering the state's Unemployment Compensation, Workforce Development, Labor Market Statistics, and Early Learning programs. The Agency's *Office of Early Learning* is responsible for implementation of the state's Child Care Resource & Referral, School Readiness, and Voluntary Prekindergarten programs.**

### **Supporting All of Florida's Children and Families**

Florida welcomes nearly 600 newborns every day and is home to more than one million children younger than five. Of these, approximately 600,000 attend some type of early learning program. With so many of our children in care, quality early learning options are a high priority because children are counting on us to make sure they have every advantage and opportunity available for success in school and in life. There are currently 31 early learning coalitions providing early learning/school readiness services in every county.

**Florida Statute 411.01** has many requirements for early learning coalitions in implementing school readiness services. Requirements that benefit children with suspected or identified Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) include:

- Board membership that includes a representative of programs for children with disabilities under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
- Providing the elements necessary to prepare at-risk children for school, including health/developmental screenings and referrals, and an appropriate educational program
- Implementing a comprehensive program of school readiness services that enhance the cognitive, social, and physical development of children
- Extending eligibility for school readiness services to three- and four-year-old children who may not be economically disadvantaged but who have disabilities, have been served in a specific part-time or combination of part-time exceptional education programs with required special services, and were previously reported for funding part time with the Florida Education Finance Program as exceptional students

### **Florida Child Care Resource & Referral Program**

The Agency for Workforce Innovation houses and operates a call center available to all families and providers that seek information or assistance with Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK), School Readiness, Child Care Resource & Referral (CCR&R), and support services for providers that serve children with disabilities. Child Care Resource & Referral services available to all families include:

- **FREE** customized listing of early learning providers based on the family's needs
- Resources that explain quality early learning and its benefits
- Financial assistance strategies
- Information and referrals to other community social services

<b>Families Requesting Referrals for Child Care for Children ages Birth to 14 with Suspected or Diagnosed Autism Spectrum Disorder</b>		
2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008 Year-to-date
214	228	161

**Warm Line**

**Florida Statute 402.3018** mandates the provision of a toll-free number to provide assistance and consultation specifically to child care personnel regarding the inclusion of children with disabilities and special health care needs. This number is known as the Warm Line. The toll-free local Warm Line is staffed by an Inclusion Specialist, who is available to any early learning program requesting information relating to the disability and special health care needs issues of children. The scope of Warm Line services to families of children with suspected or identified Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) include:

- Administering Ages and Stages Questionnaires, Devereux Early Childhood Assessments, and other screening tools designed to identify “red flags” in social-emotional, communication, and cognitive development
- Referrals to Early Steps, ChildFind, Center for Autism and Related Disorders (CARD), School District Exceptional Student Education programs, neurologists, developmental behavioral pediatricians, Head Start, and private therapists
- On-site technical assistance to early learning programs consisting of strategies and accommodations to help children with ASD be successfully included
- In-service training for staff and parents on ASD, sensory integration, and strategies to manage challenging behaviors
- Collaborating with CCR&R specialists and families to find successful placement in smaller environments, such as family child care homes, when necessary

Local Inclusion Specialists report the following challenges in effectively serving families impacted by Autism Spectrum Disorder:

- Failure of parent to follow through on referrals to other agencies
- Staff/Child ratios and group sizes can result in an environment being overstimulating for a child with ASD
- Early learning programs are fiscally unable to make accommodations needed for optimal environment (adaptive equipment, reduced ratios)
- Lack of caregiver training
- Limited community services and lengthy waiting lists for services
- Limited number of early learning programs that are trained or willing to include children with severe ASD

**HB 1291** proposes to include Autism Spectrum Disorder within training requirements for personnel of child care facilities; the *Office of Early Learning Warm Line Inclusion Specialists* currently provide related trainings and can continue to offer professional development on ASD, sensory integration issues, and other relevant topics.

For more information about the AWI-Office of Early Learning or Florida Child Care Resource and Referral Warm Line please call the Agency for Workforce Innovation at 1-866-357-3239 or visit [www.flready.com](http://www.flready.com).