Legislative Testimony

EXHIBIT 19
DATE Jan. 14, 2005
HB

Madame Chairman and members of the committee, my name is Susan Serumgard, and I have been a resident of Helena for 10 1/2 years. With me today are my two youngest sons, Jordan, who is 4 years old, and Kade, who is 2 years old.

Public speaking is not one of my favorite things to participate in, but I felt compelled to come here today to tell you my sons' story and to fight for their best chance at a positive future.

You see, Jordan and Kade are autistic. I can tell you that as a mother, the most profoundly painful moment in my life was when a pediatric neurologist confirmed my worst fears. Jordan and Kade had not been reaching their developmental milestones and, in fact, were far behind their peers. My two older sons had reached their milestones right along normal timelines and have even excelled in many areas. I knew in my heart with Jordan and Kade that something was very wrong, but having a specialist confirm those fears was devastating. I had never dealt with anything like this before and really did not know where to turn for guidance.

At our first visit with a speech therapist our neurologist had referred us to, she asked me right away, "Have you been in contact with Family Outreach"? She explained to me that Family Outreach was an organization that aided families with disabled children. She strongly encouraged me to contact them, and I did.

Without a doubt, that was the most important and beneficial step I have taken for my sons, and my family since the diagnosis.

When a family is faced with such a devastating disorder such as autism, there is such an array of emotions. I have grieved for the future that I dreamed my sons would have, and for what might have been. I worry about what life will be like for them in our society. I have wanted the very best chance at a good life for them, but I did not know where to start. Family Outreach has helped me cope with all of this, and much more. Karla Hood has been our family support provider from day one, and is quite simply our guardian angel. She has provided us with emotional support, education, training, etc. Jordan received Part C services in the beginning. Then, when he turned 3, he was placed on the general fund. During that time, he was on the waiting list for Intensive Services and after being on the list for two years, received an intensive slot this past November. With that, he receives habilitation training four to five days a week, respite services are available, and he has received much needed therapy and training equipment. My youngest son, Kade, will unfortunately lose the services he has been receiving through Part C when he turns 3 next month, because there is no general fund to fall back on.

Research has proven that early intervention is the key to autistic children making gains in development and functioning. Without it, they will lag even further behind. Early intervention has played a

vital role in my little boys gaining skills and progressing little by little every day. Jordan fortunately had the general fund to rely on when his Part C services ended, but Kade will not have that option and he will be losing his habilitation training. He is on the waiting list for Intensive Services but the waiting list is long. There are not enough funds to provide more Intensive slots for these children who desperately need this early intervention. My son and other children like him do not have the luxury of time. Right now is what is important.

I am not here to ask for everything to be handed to my children. I work very hard every day to help my sons gain skills and progress. However, I can only do so much with the resources and knowledge that I have attained thus far. Raising special needs children takes extra help and skills way beyond what is needed to successfully raise a normally developing child.

[redacted]

I am asking today that you please continue to fund child and family services, and provide funding for extra slots for the Intensive Program so that Kade and other children like him can continue to receive the early intervention they so desperately need, and [redacted] parents like myself can continue to receive the training and support we need to raise our beautiful and special children

Thank you for giving of your time [redacted] and allowing me to speak to you today.