

## For councilman, autism awareness is personal



City Councilman-At Large Derek Green, center, will again be joined by family and friends in his efforts to raise awareness about autism. He has a child who is autistic.

— Tribune Photo by Samaria Bailey

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City Councilman-At-Large Derek Green is working to raise awareness about autism, a brain development disorder, with activities this month in observance of National Autism Awareness Month.

As the father of an autistic child, Green praised Philadelphia as a place that provides significant resources to families like his but said there was always room for more.

“Autism does not discriminate on ethnicity, economic background or where you live,” he said. “It’s been a growing dynamic across the country.”

Green continued that when his son was diagnosed more than a decade ago, the rate of autism in children nationally was 1 in 200 but had increased since then.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1 in 68 children had been identified with autism spectrum disorder in 2014.



In addition, the Pennsylvania Autism Census noted an increase in the number of individuals with autism who were receiving services in Philadelphia County. In 2011, 2,142 cases were reported but by 2015, that number had more than doubled to 4,617.

The School District of Philadelphia also reported an increase in the number of students with autism, classified as a primary or secondary disability.

“The numbers have increased annually over the last five years even as our general enrollment has fallen,” said Raven Hill, a school district spokeswoman.

During the 2013-2014 school year, 2,416 students had autism. This year, the number is 2,890.

With such increases, Green said, raising awareness and resources are key in helping families.

“Compared to other cities, we have a wealth of resources others don’t have. We have organizations like the Center for Autism, which celebrated its 60th anniversary in the fall; we have the Philadelphia Autism Project, a program which was launched [by Councilman-At-Large Denny O’ Brien] to bring together activists, parents, educators as well as physicians and clinics, all in one space to make a one step shop...and the Bureau of Autism Services on the state level.”

Green also noticed some of the area colleges and universities as resources, including “Arcadia, who is trying to train the next generation of teachers to work with children on the autism spectrum.”

“But,” he added, “there is still additional work needed to get the word out about “Autism and resources for families.”

On April 7, Green is scheduled to mark Autism Awareness Day in the city.

On April 9, he will support the grand opening of the West Philadelphia office of Jaden’s Voice, an autism support nonprofit ran by Terri Matthews, a Black mother of an autistic son. Among other efforts, Jaden’s Voice provides financial grants “to persons directly impacted” by Autism.

Matthews said Jaden’s Voice is about to relaunch their “tech, teach and talk for families using iPads” and is working on developing a directory of “businesses, restaurants, daycares, churches, salons, fun activities and other places and spaces that are autism friendly and approved by Jaden’s Voice.”

In the meantime, Matthews appealed for support.

“Due to our growth and limited resources, we will have to restructure a little bit to service more clients. We are growing so quickly,” she said. “We need the community’s support in getting the word out that we are here but we also need donations to support our efforts. We receive no funding. This entire organization is funded by me.”



On April 21 and 22, Green, as the chairman for City Council Committee on Disabilities, will lead hearings focused on the “The Philadelphia Autism Project” and other efforts to promote autism awareness. Both hearings are open to the public and will be held at 2 p.m.

The Jaden’s Voice open house will be held from 12 to 3 p.m. April 9 at 5548 Chestnut St.