



# MASSACHUSETTS ADVOCATES for CHILDREN

Celebrating 40 years of ... Changing conditions for many ... Helping one at a time.

## AUTISM PARENTS AND PROFESSIONAL TRAINING PROJECT: ADDRESSING CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC BARRIERS FACED BY PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH ASD



“Charles” came to MAC’s Autism Special Education Legal Support Center (“the Center”) as a four year old diagnosed by specialists at Boston Medical Center. His Haitian parents, who are low-income and do not speak English, were very concerned because he exhibited severe, dangerous, and escalating behaviors resulting from his ASD. They watched him regress due to the inadequate services provided by the local school district. Charles had been home without any services for months, and was then placed in a classroom ill-equipped to meet his needs. Although reportedly bright, his unaddressed communication deficits and escalating behaviors interfered with his ability to gain any skills across settings. Charles’ parents did not know where to turn for help. They were referred to MAC to learn needed skills to help advocate for their son and for legal representation. Through MAC’s training and advocacy efforts, “Charles” was placed in a program specializing in educating children with autism who have severe and challenging behaviors, where he began to slowly but steadily make progress. He was also found eligible for intensive home services through the state’s new Children’s Autism Medicaid Waiver program, created through the Center’s legislative advocacy efforts. Charles’ case illuminated many of the cultural and linguistic barriers faced by Haitian parents of children with ASD. Charles’s mother was an active participant in the parent training and litigation process, empowering her to become more involved in MAC’s training project and assist in reaching out to help other Haitian families facing similar barriers.

MAC launched the Autism Special Education Legal Support Center in 2002 to meet the demand from the spike in growth of children being diagnosed with autism, and to aid in helping children just like “Charles” receive the specialized and intensive services necessary to develop their potential and demonstrate competence. Integral to the Center has been the **Autism Parents and Professionals Training Project**, whose goals are to provide:

- Culturally and linguistically-appropriate intensive training to Latino and Haitian parents of children with autism regarding services and programs necessary for children on the spectrum to reach their potential and regarding the legal right to obtain these services;
- Outreach, training and information to parents statewide; and
- Workshops for medical professionals and educators to address legal requirements and effective strategies to secure the full range of necessary educational services necessary for children with autism to demonstrate competence.

During 2008, with the generous support of Autism Speaks, The Nancy Lurie Marks Family Foundation and private donors, the Project was successful in achieving its goals by providing:

- A series of monthly interactive special education law workshops, designed to overcome cultural, linguistic, and literacy barriers of **Haitian and Latino** parents of children with autism.
- **Parent-selected training topics** which included general discussion about autism and the need for special education laws; transition; and a multi-part training series about IEP home services and parent training, communication options, understanding the IEP service delivery grid and independent evaluations.
- Training to **Spanish-speaking Latino Parents** about how to advocate for the systemic needs of their children with ASD in the public school system.
- Training and information for approximately **600 parents statewide** regarding their legal right to obtain special education services and programs necessary to meet the unique needs of children with ASD.
- Twenty workshops relevant to special education laws and procedures for approximately **500 medical professionals and educators** working with children on the autism spectrum.

The Autism Center’s efforts to ensure that children with autism overcome lowered expectations and receive equal educational opportunities have also led to important systemic changes that can benefit thousands of children and families with ASD, including the enactment of the Children’s Autism Medicaid Waiver and the Autism IEP Act. The Center strives to assure that these new laws are implemented in a way that fully benefits children and families in need.