



# EMBRACING SOME VERY SPECIAL NEEDS

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In Minnesota, children with special needs are not receiving the early assessment and intervention services they need to be successful.

"Early intervention is key. But children out there are presenting who need treatment but they can't get assessment," Maureen Walsh, director of community relations and development at Minnetonka's St. David's Center for Child & Family Development, explains. "In the Twin Cities there is an absolute bottleneck around assessment."

According to the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH), children with special needs benefit greatly from the earliest possible diagnosis and intervention.

"The sooner problems or potential risks are identified, the greater the chance of eliminating or minimizing existing problems or preventing future problems," the agency emphasizes in a new report. The MDH report also warns that Minnesota ranks 40th nationally in the percentage of young children with special needs who receive early intervention services.



It's a problem that the staff at St. David's Center, a West metro preschool and treatment facility for many children with special needs, is working to solve.

"We are trying to prevent long-term, expensive needs. Late intervention really negatively impacts how much people are able to enter society—fully," Walsh says. "Some of these children can enter mainstream kindergarten with some support."

Specifically, the non-profit is hoping to put together a community-based assessment and intervention team for young children with special needs and other behavioral health issues, including autism. Their hope is that eventually this team will become mobile—traveling to communities around the metro area so that children with special needs can get the early assessment and treatment that experts in the field agree is vital.

The team would be run by experienced licensed mental health professionals including clinical social workers, occupational therapists and speech pathologists.

According to Walsh, the project has moved from planning phase to implementation phase because of a \$250,000 grant, which the group received earlier this month from the Medica Foundation.

"This funding allows us to make a significant impact on health concerns important to the communities we serve," the Medica Foundation said in a statement.

Walsh said the grant will be doled out over three years and that St. David's Center plans to use \$75,000 in the first year for planning and another \$75,000 the following year to get the community-based assessment team in place. The third year, the plan is to use the remaining \$100,000 to take the project into other metro communities.

"There are some pretty acute needs out there," Walsh said.