

## Committee votes to mandate autism therapy coverage

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MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) - Four-year-old Liam Hall once didn't communicate verbally because of autism. But his mother said he will start kindergarten able to communicate with his teacher and, most likely, in a mainstream classroom.

Catey Hall said her son's improvement was because of hours of applied behavioral analysis therapy, an intensive therapy that families pay thousands of dollars for out of pocket each year.

It has changed his life, she said.

Parents of children with autism applauded Wednesday after the House Insurance Committee approved legislation mandating insurance coverage of the therapy that is out of the financial reach of many parents.

The approval was a victory for parents who have been fighting to cover the treatment that can cost about \$100-per-hour for intense speech, occupational and other behavioral therapy. But the legislation faces an uncertain future as it heads to a vote in the House floor, with opponents arguing the therapy is too expensive to be required.

Alabama is one of five states that does not mandate coverage, said Bama Hager, program director with the Autism Society of Alabama.

"Right now in Alabama, our kids are being left behind. They don't receive the therapies that kids in states around us are receiving. Our families are under a great deal of financial stress to provide the therapies to their children even though they are paying their insurance policies," Hager said.

A spokeswoman for Blue Cross Blue Shield of Alabama said some plans, at the discretion of the sponsoring employer, cover the service. The company said the legislation would be "most liberal in the nation in terms of autism benefits."

"Blue Cross believes that employers, the business men and women who are providing jobs within our state, should be allowed to determine if they want to provide this benefit, not the state legislature. HB284 forces employers across the state to pay for a benefit that they may not need and can't afford or access," Blue Cross spokeswoman Koko Mackin wrote in an email.

The committee also put yearly coverage caps on the therapy depending on a patient's age.

