

Grassroots Organizations Join Forces With Autism Speaks to Launch National Community Network to Support African American Families Affected by Autism

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The National African American Autism Community Network (NAAACN) will address the sobering fact that African American children are diagnosed with autism 18 to 24 months later than their white counterparts.

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Timed to coincide with Autism Awareness Month (April), a grassroots network of nonprofit organizations and community advocates, in partnership with Autism Speaks, announced the launch today of the National African American Autism Community Network (NAAACN), a nationwide support network for African American families affected by autism.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD), refers to a range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech and nonverbal communication, as well as by unique strengths and differences. ASD is estimated to affect 1 in 68 children in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. But African American children are diagnosed with autism 18 to 24 months later than their white counterparts.

“We call attention to the disparities between diagnoses, access to early intervention and special education services in underserved communities,” said Camille Proctor, founder of The Color of Autism Foundation, a founding member organization of NAAACN based in Michigan. “Our mission is to raise awareness of autism spectrum disorders and to impact public policy, while providing education and resources to families, children, adults, and the communities in which they live.”

NAAACN (pronounced nay-can) serves as a link between African American communities and mainstream developmental disability, behavioral health and governmental institutions, all of which often fail to address issues specific to African Americans impacted by autism.

Autism Speaks provides technical assistance, capacity development, and other resources to NAAACN as part of its work to empower people with autism and their families with resources, online tools, and information covering the life span.

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“Together, our organizations firmly believe that the most effective advocacy for any community, especially one that is underserved and historically marginalized, must come from individuals within that community who have walked the same path,” said Andy Shih, senior vice president of public health and inclusion initiatives at Autism Speaks.

Arlicia Sims, co-founder of Jory’s Journey, a NAAACN founding member organization based in Alabama, shared her motivation for helping to launch the network: “There is no cure for autism, so my son faces a life of not only being African American and male, but on the autism spectrum as well.

“This journey has pushed me to become aggressive and engaging for the welfare of his future. Our children are diagnosed later and receive much-needed therapies the slowest because of economic and racial disparities. It is important that we raise awareness but more than that, hope that NAAACN can become a second home to families affected by autism.”

To mark its debut, NAAACN will hold a series of “Spectrum of Care” town halls across the country to educate and engage parents, caregivers, community providers, local legislators and all who are interested in bridging health disparities in autism.

The first town hall will be held in Detroit on Saturday, April 21, 2018; the second, in Washington, D.C. on Saturday, May 19. Both events are free and open to the public. To register, visit: <http://www.naaacn.com>. Future town halls are being planned for additional cities.

“NAAACN aspires to not only serve families with children affected by autism, but also to educate the African American community as a whole,” Proctor said. “We aim to lessen the isolation that many parents experience which in turn will foster and create a community of acceptance.”

About the National African American Autism Community Network

We empower and support African American families affected by autism. Through our network of community partners, we advocate for increased awareness, screening, and treatment of autism in underserved communities. Learn more at: naaacn.com.

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