

## Amerigroup Case Managers: Advocates for Our Members

Amerigroup Behavioral Health Case Manager Kathleen Dunn likes to tell members, particularly the young mothers, about her grandson. When she's on the phone, whether it's a call she receives or one of the many calls she makes, she'll inevitably start talking about 6-year-old Candin. She'll rave about his beautiful eyes, his love of trains and his latest milestones. She'll even marvel at her daughter Krishonda's hard work and determination in raising him. It's possible the members have seen the family themselves – being the focus of newspaper articles and hospital publications, hosting their own website, and even appearing on national talk shows.

That's OK. Kathleen wants exposure for her grandson. More importantly, she wants the exposure for his condition: child autism. Thanks to the efforts of Kathleen and others like her, awareness about autism is increasing. Autism is the fastest-growing developmental disability in the United States, with one in 110 children diagnosed and the ratio continuing to rise. Boys are four times more likely than girls to have autism.<sup>1</sup> But the diagnosis can be hard to come by, particularly for financially vulnerable populations that may be entirely unfamiliar with the disease. But here, Amerigroup members have an advantage: They have Kathleen.

"I can hear it when I get these young parents on the phone," she said. "I am usually speaking with the mother, who may be handling the situation by herself. She is tired and at the end of her rope. She has heard that she has a bad child with problems at school. That's when we work to find out if there's more to the situation."

Kathleen isn't doing all the talking. She's asking questions, searching for indicators that a larger condition may exist. Then, if criteria are met, she'll recommend a neurological evaluation. In fact, she'll do more than recommend it; she'll actually make the call to the pediatric neurologist herself.

"These doctors are busy, and the wait time for an initial appointment can be three or four months," Kathleen said. "But these mothers need answers right away. So, I will call up the doctor's office, and I plead and beg as best and as nice as I can. You have to have humility. I'm not too proud to beg when it comes to the children."

Kathleen is fighting for several reasons, personally and professionally. She knows that awareness – on



**Amerigroup Case Manager Kathleen Dunn**

both a global level and on an individual level – is crucial. “With anything in life, when you understand, you are better prepared,” she said, echoing the advice she offered her daughter upon Candin’s diagnosis three years ago.

Since that time, in addition to participation in autism awareness walks and fundraisers, Kathleen found her way back into working with managed care populations when she joined Amerigroup in time for the state of Tennessee’s rollout of the restructured TennCare program in April 2007. “I wanted to come

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back and work in managed care under the new program,” she said. “I wanted to help the indigent. I felt that was my mission. And Amerigroup has allowed me to do that. We have an integrated approach to behavioral health that allows everybody to work together for better treatment for the members.”

What Kathleen is putting into action is Amerigroup’s Integrated Medical Management Model (IM3), which addresses behavioral, social and physical care in an overall effort to meet the complete needs of members. The process is to identify, assess, implement and monitor – all with a personal, human touch. Truth is, what Kathleen does at Amerigroup isn’t unusual, but it is extraordinary.

Throughout the 11 Amerigroup health plans, more than 440 assigned case managers – including those with a focus on behavioral health, like Kathleen – work with a multidisciplinary team to develop and support individualized care plans on behalf of the members. At Amerigroup, they’re part of a coordinated care team that, companywide, consists of 1,091 doctors, nurses and social workers. In addition to connecting members to the right medical care, this integrated care process includes identifying community resources and providing health education and support on a number of levels.

“We are consistent in the integrated approach to our members and have physical and behavioral health case managers at the table when we are discussing clinical cases,” said William Wood, M.D., Amerigroup chief medical officer of behavioral health in Tennessee. “We

are also focused on the early and consistent identification of members who need services so as to keep them at their optimal level of function and in the community with whatever support is necessary.”

It’s her aggressive nature that has led Kathleen to help so many families through the trauma of the diagnosis and to ensuring these young, vulnerable members get the services they need as children with disabilities; like the 8-year-old boy who, having never been seen for autism, faced expulsion from



**Amerigroup Case Manager Kathleen Dunn with her daughter, Krishonda, and grandson, Candin**

school or the 14-year-old middle schooler whose mom thought he suffered from attention deficit disorder. “It breaks my heart to see these children go so long without treatment,” she said.

The help that Kathleen provides these beleaguered parents is more than a suggested course of action or single, isolated conversation: it’s a relationship. “I stay in constant contact,” she said. “I call and tell them, ‘You’re doing a great job.’ I praise them. Somebody’s got to. If you don’t praise them, no one will. And I cry with them. And, before we get off the phone, I always, always find something to laugh about with them. It truly is part of the medicine. I give them everything I have to give.”

For Kathleen, it all goes back to her grandson Candin. “Had we not had him, we wouldn’t be as educated or as passionate,” she said. “He united the family and helped us to be able to help others.”

“We are advocates,” Kathleen continued, adding that the family’s annual goal is to raise \$5,000 for autism awareness through the meals they prepare together for Nashville-area businesses. “And I am so proud of how hard my daughter has worked. She is not just an advocate for autism; she is an advocate for all of those with special needs.”

Evidently, it runs in the family.

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1. Autism Speaks Inc. “Facts About Autism.” [www.autismspeaks.org/what-autism/facts-about-autism/facts-about-autism](http://www.autismspeaks.org/what-autism/facts-about-autism/facts-about-autism) (accessed July 19, 2011).