



GENERAL FEDERATION of WOMEN'S CLUBS

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By Joyce DeCunzo, GFWC Western Region Representative

National Autism Awareness Month

According to the National Autism Association, autism is a bio-neurological developmental disability that generally appears before the age of 3. Individuals with autism typically have difficulties in verbal and non-verbal communication, social interactions, and leisure or play activities. They often suffer from numerous co-morbid conditions which may include allergies, asthma, epilepsy, digestive disorders, persistent viral infections, feeding disorders, sensory integration dysfunction, sleeping disorders, and more.

Autism now affects 1 in 44 children. Over half are classified as having an intellectual disability or borderline intellectual disability. Boys are four times more likely to have autism than girls. About 40% of children with autism do not speak. The rate of autism has steadily grown over the last 20 years. It is the fastest growing developmental disorder yet is the most underfunded. Early diagnosis and intervention are key to helping these individuals reach their full potential.

GFWC resolution 170-010 addresses this critical concern. Clubs are urged to advocate for legislation requiring health insurance coverage for intervention programs, expanded insurance coverage for services, therapies and treatment, and continued research into the causes, treatment, and prevention of ASD.

Home and Community Based Services

Traditionally, people who needed long term care were taken care of by their friends and family members, or they entered nursing homes when their care became too difficult to be delivered in their own homes. In the 1980s, delivery of paid home care services, such as personal care, nursing, respite care, adult day care and assisted living, became available to many who were elderly or disabled. The goal of these services was three-fold: provide care at a lesser cost than nursing homes, provide respite for family/friend caregivers, and provide care that helps a person maintain as much independence as possible. Slogans like "home is where the health is" were often used. This movement toward home care was spurred by the availability of government funding through Medicaid waivers and through Medicare.

GFWC resolution 170-060 (Family Caregivers) and GFWC support for the Elizabeth Dole Home Care Act are evidence of GFWC's support of home and community-based service programs.

The Elizabeth Dole Home Care Act was recently introduced by Senators Tester, Hassan and Moran. This legislation would expand community-based services for aging veterans as well as improve VA

support for veterans and caregivers of all ages. This Act helps recognize the vital work of caregivers, while also expanding home and community-based services for veterans. This bipartisan bill is an important way to support veterans so that they can live healthy and dignified lives.

The Family Caregivers resolution addresses the need for help and training for family caregivers, who are often overworked and under-equipped to deal with the needs of their family member. It also recognizes the need for caregivers to take care of themselves.

GFWC Health and Wellness Legislative Priorities

Food Insecurity: Urge Congress to provide critical funding and resources to food banks, increasing access to food products utilizing the Emergency Food Assistance program and the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program, known as the Farmers to Families Food Box Program, to address the expansive problem of chronic hunger across our nation made even worse during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also urge Congress to extend the Department of Agriculture's ability to allow flexible child nutrition program to ensure school children get meals at school and meal sites when they are out of school.

Suicide Prevention: Urge Congress to strengthen suicide prevention resources for state and local communities by increasing funding for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) National Center for Injury Prevention and Control programs. The goal of suicide prevention is to reduce factors that increase risk and increase factors that promote resilience.

Global Vaccinations: Urge Congress to fully fund global childhood immunizations. Every 20 seconds, a child dies from vaccine-preventable disease, resulting in 1.5 million deaths every year, and accounting for nearly a third of all childhood deaths. Support funding the CDC's polio eradication and measles elimination programs through the Health and Human Services appropriations bill, and funding for the US Agency for International Development, UNICEF, the World Health Organization, and the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization programs through the State Department/Foreign Operations appropriations bill.

Veterans Support: Increase funding for mental health counseling and suicide prevention, and resources to reduce homelessness.

Overall Health and Wellness

Many GFWC resolutions deal with health initiatives such as heart disease, diabetes and cancer. One way we can all improve our health is to connect more with the outdoors. The U.S. Forest Service has published this article:

"The physiological response to being outside in nature is real, and it's measurable," said Michelle Kondo, a research social scientist with the USDA Forest Service's Northern Research Station. "There are many physical and psychological benefits of nature that scientists have observed, which can better help us understand how nature supports wellness in the body, mind and community."

1. Physical Wellness

Being outside in green spaces supports an active and healthy lifestyle, which has shown to increase life expectancy, improve sleep quality and reduce cancer risk. "Many of the benefits afforded to us by green spaces partially results from more opportunities to be active," said Kondo. "Being in outdoor green spaces can increase a person's motivation, too." Studies also show that being outside in nature is relaxing, reducing our stress, cortisol levels, muscle tension and heart rates – all of which are risk factors for cardiovascular disease.

“Since scientists have gained access to data sets, sometimes capturing an entire country’s population of medical records and hospital data, we are finding that patient diagnoses and chronic illness risk are often related to where an individual lives and their proximity to green spaces,” said Kondo. “And that’s a correlation that is likely to strengthen as we conduct more studies.” Along with supporting physical wellness, nature also bolsters mental wellness in the individual.

2. Mental Wellness

There are many mental wellness benefits associated with being outside in green spaces, such as lower risk of depression and faster psychological stress recovery. Studies have shown that being in nature can restore and strengthen our mental capacities, increasing focus and attention. Green spaces can support a wealth of benefits including reduced mortality rates, better cardiovascular health, and lower violence in communities. One experiment asked two groups of people to perform a mentally strenuous task, such as a math test. One group is asked to take their break in a green space, outside in a park, while the other takes their break near a busy street intersection. The results suggested that the group in the natural setting showed increased focus and higher levels of concentration than the second group.

Another major component of mental health is social connection. The outdoors serves as a venue to come together with friends and family and connect with the larger community. "This togetherness is especially important for us now," said Kondo. "We are finding that isolation is a killer, and that the outdoors really provides that space for us to come together under trees or to walk together along trails."

3. Wellness in the Community

Access to nature can benefit entire communities such as reducing environmental stressors commonly found in cities: air pollution, noise, and heat. "Our research is really focused on different types of environments and how they affect people," said Kondo. "For example, we have studied vacant city lots, the cleaning and greening of those vacant lots, planting grass and a couple of trees, and the impact that change has on the surrounding community."

Cleaning and greening have also been shown to reduce overall neighborhood crime by 13% and reduce nearby residents' feelings of depression by 41%.

Nature in densely populated areas also has been shown to affect how people interact with one another. "We've found in neighborhoods that receive tree plantings or other greening initiatives, that people tend to have better attitudes towards their neighbors," said Kondo, "which in turn often results in better relationships."

Conclusion

Whether it is a park in your neighborhood or exploring the vast landscapes of national forests and grasslands, there are benefits to be had when we step outside.

“Wellness is wholistic in that it is comprised of physical and mental health as well as the health of our communities,” said Kondo. “All of these benefits add up and reduce adverse impacts on our bodies and have restorative characteristics. So, get outdoors and enjoy nature’s gift of wellness.”

GFWC Learning Gateway Webinar Series

All GFWC members are invited to attend a webinar series featuring the 2022-2024 GFWC Honoray Chairmen. All three sessions will help members be advocates.

THE GFWC LEARNING GATEWAY SERIES

FOR THE ENCOURAGEMENT AND ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN: GFWC MEMBERS ARE ENCOURAGED TO PARTICIPATE IN THE GFWC LEARNING GATEWAY WEBINAR SERIES TO LEARN DIRECTLY FROM THE 2022-2024 GFWC HONORARY CHAIRMEN.

MARCH 22 @ 7 P.M. – *Advocacy Challenges: Overcoming Roadblocks and Building Coalition Support* by Stephenie Foster, Founding Partner of Smash Strategies, Honorary Chairman for GFWC Juniors' Special Program

APRIL 18 @ 7 P.M. – *Chocolate, Chardonnay, and Chanel - The Power of Personal Behaviors in Health and Wellness* by Nagi Kumar, Ph.D., Cancer Chemoprevention and Initiatives Moffitt Cancer Center, Honorary Chairman for Health & Wellness Community Service Program

APRIL 25 @ 7 P.M. – *Drawing Connections: Prevention Demands Equity* by Monika Johnson Hostler, President of the National Alliance to End Sexual Violence, Honorary Chairman for GFWC Signature Program



A picture containing outdoor, sidewalk, lined, walkway

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March 22 at 7:00 p.m. - [Advocacy Challenges: Overcoming Roadblocks and Building Coalition Support](#)

April 18 at 7:00 p.m. - [The Power of Personal Behaviors in Health and Wellness](#)

April 25 at 7:00 p.m. - [Drawing Connections: Prevention Demands Equity](#)

GFWC LEGISLATION AND PUBLIC POLICY COMMITTEE

The members of the GFWC Legislation and Public Policy Committee are here for you. Please contact the member in your region with any questions you may have. We would love to speak to your state federation or club, in person or via Zoom.

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TOGETHER We Advocate For Those In Need