



## Legislation Text

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**File #:** 14-0215, **Version:** 1

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### **A RESOLUTION DECLARING APRIL 2014 AS AUTISM AWARENESS MONTH**

**WHEREAS**, April is Autism Awareness Month; and

**WHEREAS**, autism spectrum disorder is a neurological disorder characterized in varying degrees, by difficulties in social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication and repetitive behaviors; and

**WHEREAS**, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently released revised figures indicating a 30 percent increase in the number of individuals diagnosed with autism since 2012 with 1 in 68 children currently diagnosed with autism; and

**WHEREAS**, autism is even more common among boys, affecting 1 in 42; and

**WHEREAS**, autism is the fastest growing developmental disability in the United States, affecting more than three million people and it is an urgent public health crisis that demands national, state, and local responses; and

**WHEREAS**, symptoms and characteristics of autism may present themselves in a variety of combinations and can result in significant lifelong impairment of an individual's ability to learn, develop healthy interactive behaviors, and understand verbal as well as nonverbal communication; and

**WHEREAS**, as the effort to address autism continues, doctors, therapists, and educators can help persons with autism adjust to its challenges and provide early, accurate diagnosis, and the resulting appropriate education, intervention, and therapy that are vital to future growth and development; and

**WHEREAS**, Brookfield Zoo, a jewel of the Forest Preserves of Cook County that is managed by the Chicago Zoological Society is advancing the role that accredited zoos play in supporting those affected by autism; and

**WHEREAS**, the Chicago Zoological Society is supporting individuals with autism by: advancing the guest experience at Brookfield Zoo; launching the first of its kind zoo-based pilot project for early learners on the autism spectrum; and building and leveraging partnerships with organizations that include Autism Speaks, Easter Seals, Misericordia, Best Buddies of Illinois, Helping Hand, Aspire, Community Support Services, local special education classrooms, special recreation associations, and others; and

**WHEREAS**, at Brookfield Zoo, the Society has created innovative care kits for individuals with autism, that include noise-dampening headphones, self-identifying stickers that communicate, "I'm not misbehaving, I have autism," visual schedules, and personal identification bracelets and name tags; and

**WHEREAS**, the care kits are available at the zoo's North and South Guest Relations booths and can be utilized by any zoo guest; and

**WHEREAS**, to better prepare individuals with autism for their zoo visit and support them during their visit, the Society has also created social stories for high sensory areas of the zoo in addition to its visual schedules, both of which are

available through its website; and

**WHEREAS**, as part of its efforts to ensure that guests of all abilities receive stellar service, the Society revamped its customer serving training in 2014 in partnership with the LaGrange Area Department of Special Education (LADSE) to better equip and educate staff to meet the needs of guests with developmental and intellectual disabilities; and

**WHEREAS**, the Society has also focused programmatic resources on improving the lives of those affected by autism by launching an innovative project to support early learners on the autism spectrum-the first such program developed by an accredited zoo; and

**WHEREAS**, in the fall of 2013, the Society launched “Family Fun Saturdays at Brookfield Zoo,” in partnership with Easter Seals to create inclusion and animal-centric experiences for early learners with autism spectrum disorder; and

**WHEREAS**, this innovative project was based on recent research which found that the presence of an animal can significantly increase positive social behaviors among children with autism and that inclusive learning/experiential environments support the development of adaptive behavior and communication for early learners with autism spectrum disorder; and

**WHEREAS**, inclusion-based and animal-centric activities were developed and facilitated by Easter Seals therapists and Brookfield Zoo staff and volunteers to address or even advance developmental milestones for early learners with autism; activities sought to engage individuals in sensory, social, visual, fine, and gross motor skill development in an inclusive and nurturing environment; and

**WHEREAS**, the project took place for six consecutive Saturdays with more than 20 families participating; and

**WHEREAS**, this marked the first time any accredited zoo has leveraged such research and zoo-based resources to support early learners on the autism spectrum; and

**WHEREAS**, based on feedback from parents, Easter Seals, and Brookfield Zoo staff, the Society is working to make the program a permanent resource for families and will subsequently assess scalability potential among other zoos accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums; and

**WHEREAS**, to mark Autism Awareness Month, Brookfield Zoo is participating in the national Zoos Go Blue initiative in partnership with the Association of Zoos and Aquariums and Autism Speaks; and

**WHEREAS**, in April, the zoo’s lights will go blue and an autism awareness day will be held at the zoo in partnership with Autism Speaks where families supported by Autism Speaks will receive complimentary parking and admission to this Forest Preserves of Cook County resource; and

**WHEREAS**, as part of Autism Awareness Month, the Chicago Zoological Society will leverage its social media and communications outlets to educate the public and, in particular, zoo supporters and guests about autism; and

**WHEREAS**, at Brookfield Zoo and in diverse communities throughout Cook County, the Chicago Zoological Society is working to transform the role that accredited zoos play in supporting children and adults with disabilities, including the developmental needs and goals of individuals with autism;

**NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED**, that, I, Toni Preckwinkle, along with the members of the Forest Preserves of Cook County Board of Commissioners and on behalf of all citizens of Cook County, recognize the Chicago Zoological Society and its partners on their collective work to improve the lives of those affected by autism and for the leadership

role that Brookfield Zoo serves in supporting those with developmental and intellectual disabilities; and

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, that a suitable copy of this resolution be tendered to Dr. Stuart Strahl, President and CEO of the Chicago Zoological Society, which manages Brookfield Zoo.