

Autism Advocates Fight Back Against RFK Jr.'s Misinformation Campaign

Autism advocates across the United States are intensifying efforts to counter misinformation following recent actions by **US Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.**, who has promoted discredited claims linking vaccines to autism. The controversy erupted after the **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)** adjusted its website to reflect Kennedy's stance—a position that contradicts decades of scientific research showing no causal link between vaccines and autism.

For many advocacy groups, this move represents not only a public health risk but also a threat to the progress made in autism awareness, acceptance, and inclusion. Leaders across the autism community have responded with urgency, launching campaigns to provide accurate information, defend autistic people's rights, and ensure families have access to trustworthy health guidance.

The Immediate Response from Advocates

When the CDC's website changes came to light, organizations such as the **Association of University Centers on Disabilities** called for public health officials to "listen to autistic voices," emphasizing that community input is critical to policy decisions. Similarly, the **Autistic People of Color Fund** encouraged donations to support mutual aid initiatives.

The **Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN)** issued a stark warning on social media, stating: "Kennedy's lies endanger public health and the disabled community." Zoe Gross, ASAN's Director of Advocacy, explained that misinformation on this scale requires immediate, ongoing response.

"On all of our platforms, we immediately directed our community to alternative sources of public health information—sources not influenced by conspiracy thinking or anti-science rhetoric," Gross said.

Misinformation Becomes a Core Advocacy Challenge

For advocates, fighting autism misinformation has become a constant challenge. Since Kennedy, a long-time anti-vaccination advocate, assumed leadership of the Department of Health and Human Services in February, organizations are dedicating significant resources to debunking harmful claims.

Maria Davis-Pierre, a licensed mental health therapist and founder of **Autism in Black**, noted that misinformation disproportionately impacts autistic communities, particularly marginalized populations. “We have to constantly refute RFK’s information since we know that misinformation will harm our community more than any other,” she said.

Advocacy groups report that public engagement spikes every time Kennedy makes statements suggesting a link between vaccines and autism. Gross described the process as “like playing Whac-A-Mole,” with advocates responding to media inquiries, social media posts, and public statements.

The Historical Context of Autism Misinformation

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has been recognized for decades, yet public understanding remains incomplete. Autism affects communication, behavior, and social interaction, and ranges from individuals who live independently to those requiring extensive support.

In the 1990s, a fraudulent study falsely suggested that the **MMR (measles, mumps, rubella) vaccine** caused autism. The paper examined only 12 children, and the results were later retracted due to methodological flaws. Since then, **numerous large-scale studies** have found no evidence linking vaccines to autism. Nevertheless, the idea persists, amplified by high-profile figures like Kennedy.

“The challenge we face today is having to go back and reassure parents, despite decades of evidence proving vaccines are safe,” said Alycia Halladay, Chief Science Officer at the **Autism Science Foundation**. The organization has collaborated with the **American Academy of Pediatrics** to create clear, accessible materials to educate families.

Countering Harmful Narratives

Autism advocacy organizations have expanded efforts to combat misleading narratives. Groups like **Autism Empowerment** focus not only on sharing science-based facts but also on empowering autistic individuals to share their experiences. Platforms like **Spectrum Life Magazine**, community outreach programs, and public speaking engagements allow autistic voices to challenge misconceptions directly.

When Kennedy proposed creating a **national autism database** to investigate causes, advocates raised alarms that such a registry could potentially track autistic individuals in harmful ways. A Change.org petition opposing the plan gathered nearly 50,000 signatures, leading Kennedy to reconsider the initiative.

ASAN stressed that framing autism as a condition to be eradicated echoes historical abuses, including forced sterilization and institutionalization of disabled people. “Such ideas are profoundly disturbing and have no place in public health policy,” the organization stated.

Real-World Impacts on Families

Misinformation is not just a theoretical concern—it directly affects families seeking care. When Kennedy and former President Trump suggested that **acetaminophen use during pregnancy** causes autism, advocates like Davis-Pierre quickly directed families to credible local resources and support networks.

“This fearmongering can create gaps in diagnosis, particularly in underserved communities,” Davis-Pierre said. In the Black community, delays in diagnosis already present significant challenges, and misleading statements from government leaders exacerbate these barriers.

Focus on Tangible Support for Autistic People

Beyond combating misinformation, advocacy groups are urging the government to prioritize actionable support for autistic individuals. Long waitlists for diagnosis, limited access to health services, and barriers to employment and housing remain critical issues.

For example, the **Autism Society of Greater New Orleans** has successfully improved vaccine access for autistic individuals through multi-faceted programs. In 2023, they vaccinated over 2,000 people—far exceeding their target—and trained hundreds of medical professionals on autism-friendly practices. They also developed sensory-friendly **vaccine kits** with headphones, fidgets, and visual aids, helping reduce anxiety and pain during vaccination.

“Children and adults with autism had less fear and anxiety around the physical experience of getting vaccines,” said Claire Tibbetts, the organization’s Executive Director.

Advocates Turn to Politics to Amplify Voices

Autism advocacy groups are increasingly engaging with policymakers to counter harmful narratives and secure funding for essential services. Many are lobbying for improved early diagnosis, expanded access to therapy and in-home supports, and better employment opportunities.

Jill Escher, President of the **National Council on Severe Autism**, emphasized the need for direct communication with federal health agencies, including **CDC** and **NIH**, to ensure responsible research and evidence-based policies.

Additionally, advocates like Tonya Haynes of **Autism Speaks** bring autistic individuals to Capitol Hill to share personal stories, demonstrating the real-world impact of autism and the need for supportive policies.

Continuing the Fight

While Kennedy's statements have sparked concern, advocates remain steadfast. By combining **education, advocacy, and community engagement**, they aim to protect autistic individuals from misinformation and ensure access to essential services.

"Framing autism as some kind of disease that needs to be eradicated is harmful," Tibbetts said. "It hurts autistic people living their lives right now. Our work is about making sure they can thrive, despite the rhetoric from leadership."

For many advocacy groups, combating misinformation is now a core mission alongside improving **healthcare access, early intervention, and social inclusion** for autistic individuals. As government policies continue to evolve, the autism community remains committed to defending both truth and the rights of autistic people.