

On Tuesday December 4, 2006, A-CHAMP (<http://capwiz.com/a-champ/home/>) asked through the Schafer Report serious questions of all presidential candidates. Senator Barack Obama wants Americans to know his answers to these questions.

Will you fully fund the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act?

As a member of the Illinois State Legislature I fought to support special education and as a U.S. Senator I have continued that fight. As president, I will fully fund IDEA so that we provide children with the support they need to receive a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment based upon best practices and with the goal of fully including them in schools and the community. As the number of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) increases, we must ensure that teachers, classrooms and school districts are prepared to meet their special needs.

Do you believe that the Combating Autism Act provides enough money to find the cause, or causes, of autism and effective treatments?

I supported the Combating Autism Act of 2006. It was a good start. As President I will make sure that money appropriated by Congress for autism spectrum disorders reaches the organizations and people that they were intended for. Research is important but it is only one of the steps we need to take. Americans with ASD should be supported throughout the lifespan. Early diagnosis and early intervention has been proven to lessen the amount and intensity of services Americans with ASD need as they grow older. We must appropriate the funds needed to support all Americans with disabilities. As president, I will go beyond the Combating Autism Act to develop a comprehensive autism policy that invests \$1 billion annually by the end of my first term in office to address ASD on all fronts. I will also ensure that all federal efforts to combat ASD are coordinated through a central Federal ASD Coordinator who will work across agencies to better coordinate ASD research, awareness, treatment, and support for families.

How much funding will you request to study potential environmental triggers of autism?

There is much evidence to suggest that ASD is a genetically-based neurological condition with environmental triggers. As president, I will lead an effort to conduct research to confirm these findings and study the potential triggers. We must find out why many Americans have ASD and other special needs, the causes, and best treatments and intervention.

Do you believe there is an autism epidemic in the United States?

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) is the fastest growing developmental disorder in the United States and, perhaps the world. One in 150 children is diagnosed with ASD. These numbers can not be explained solely by increased awareness or changes to the diagnostic criteria. It is a health crisis and I will act accordingly. There are many Americans with special needs. They will have a partner in the federal government under my administration.

What will you do to stop health insurers from discriminating against people with autism and their families?

Many parents and state legislatures have led the fight to prevent medical insurance companies from delaying and denying coverage to those with ASD, claiming it as a preexisting condition. Because of this, too many Americans with special needs and their families have struggled with a crushing financial burden. Many Americans have tried to do something about this, and I applaud their efforts. In South Carolina, for example, parents Marcella Ridley and Lorri Unumb and state senators Joel Lurie (D) and David Thomas (R) led the way in passing Ryan's Law, which ensured that children with ASD would get the treatments they need. Of course, after we create universal health care by the end of my first term as president, all Americans with ASD will have access to affordable and quality health care, regardless of "preexisting" conditions.

What will you do to assure that health insurers pay for promising new treatments and behavioral therapy?

As president I will work to create universal health care by the end of my first term so that all Americans have access to affordable health care. My health care plan will also improve the quality of care available to Americans and uphold the principle of mental health parity. I will also work to bring Americans with ASD, their families and experts together to deal with important issues, like standardization of treatments, diagnostics, screening, and support for promising new treatments and therapy.

Do you think vaccines should be investigated as a possible cause of autism?

I believe that the next president must restore confidence and open communication with the American people. This includes environmental policies and government funded research. An Obama administration will go where the science and the facts lead us, whether it is about climate change or toxic heavy metals in our environment.

What will you do to protect Americans, especially young children and pregnant women, from exposure to mercury through vaccines?

I support the removal of thimerosal from all vaccines and work to ensure that Americans have access to vaccines that are mercury free.

What will you do to provide for the lifetime care that 250,000 to 500,000 current children with autism will need in the future?

ASD is not just a medical issue nor a children's issue. ASD affects behavior, communication and socialization and means that Americans with ASD will have a lifetime struggle to fully integrate within the community. However, the nation must also work to recognize the valued role that Americans with special needs have within our communities. Americans with special needs must be supported throughout their lifetimes. As President, I will work with the special needs community to ensure that those with ASD acquire the skills and education they need, achieve to their fullest capabilities and live the independent life of a full citizen in their community. I will support programs that create opportunities, improve the quality of life and maximize potential for all individuals with ASD and their families.

Would you support a large-scale federal study of the differences in health outcomes between vaccinated and unvaccinated groups?

Experience has taught that effective medical research must be "large-scale" and well funded. I believe Americans should know must know the health effects that caused by the presence of mercury in vaccines. I will also support an examination of the National Vaccine Injury Compensation program, a program designed to compensate those injured by vaccinations.

Would you support a federal right for families and individuals to choose for themselves which vaccines they will use?

I support screening for a wide variety of diseases and disorders. Early diagnosis and early intervention are the best practice for most illnesses. I believe that every American has the right to access these screenings, and I believe that every American has the right also to refuse these screenings voluntarily if they so choose. I also support a thorough and independent review of our nation's vaccination policies.

Are you satisfied that the federal vaccine approval process is free of conflicts of interests, transparent and rigorous?

As President, I will conduct a thorough examination of all federal programs to ensure that they are effective and operating in the best interests of the American people. And I will ensure that sound and unbiased science, not ideology, guides decisions made in my administration.