SCOPE:

County Mental Health and Mental Retardation Administrators
Base Service Unit Directors

PURPOSE:

The purpose of this bulletin is to clarify the conditions under which children, adolescents, and adults with autism may be eligible for services provided under the auspices of County Mental Health and Mental Retardation Programs.

DESCRIPTIVE DEFINITION:

There is significant resistance in medical and psychological literature to present a clear, succinct definition of autism. Information about autism is generally presented as a cluster of characteristics found in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-III (Revised) (DSM III R) published by the American Psychiatric Association.

The following descriptive definition, which contains the principal characteristics found in DSM III R, will be used for the purpose of this bulletin:

"AUTISM is the common term for a range of disabilities medically classified as Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD). These disorders are characterized by qualitative distortions in the development of cognitive, language, motor or social skills. These distortions are typically manifested before three years of age, and unlike developmental delays, are not normal for any stage of child development. Several key symptoms can be recognized. Reciprocal social interactions, both verbal and nonverbal, are restricted, inconsistent or 'odd' in quality, and generally difficult to carry out. Activities and interests, particularly imaginative activities,
are similarly restricted in their nature and repertoire, frequently involving a large component of repetition and resistance to change. All of these symptoms may result from a distinctive cognitive deficit in the acquisition of symbols and abstract meanings, for which people with autism often compensate by developing their rote memory skills. Finally, impairments of the central nervous system may also result in over-reactions, under-reactions or inconsistent responses to various sensory stimuli."

BACKGROUND:

Advocates for persons with autism report that County Mental Health and Mental Retardation Programs frequently either refuse to provide services or do not make appropriate services available to persons with autism. The Office of Mental Health and the Office of Mental Retardation have been asked to clarify their positions regarding the eligibility of persons with autism for services provided under the auspices of the County Mental Health and Mental Retardation Programs.

DISCUSSION:

The Mental Health and Mental Retardation Act of 1966 provides that persons with a mental disability are eligible for services administered by County Mental Health and Mental Retardation Programs. By definition, autism is a form of a mental disability. Persons with autism, therefore, are eligible for services provided under the auspices of County Mental Health and Mental Retardation Programs when the following conditions are met:

Mental Health Criteria

Children, adolescents, and adults who have functional impairments (episodic or continuous) because of mental dysfunctions expressed through behavior, thought, communications, or mood meet the criteria for eligibility for mental health services.

In the County Mental Health/Mental Retardation Program, a child, adolescent, or adult is deemed to have a mental health disability after he/she has been:

* Assessed and evaluated by a psychiatrist.

* Received a DSM III R Axis I diagnosis.

Under the Medical Assistance payment criteria, a child or adolescent up to the age of twenty-one must meet the medical necessity criteria for mental health services. The medical necessity criteria are:

* Evaluation by a licensed psychologist or physician.
* Completion of the DSM III R diagnosis, Axis I-V.

* Interagency service plan developed by the involved systems, case manager, family, adolescent, and significant others.

* Mental health treatment plan with behavioral goals and outcomes.

* The evaluation must be consistent with current Office Mental Health/Office of Medical Assistance Programs policy.

**Mental Retardation Criteria**

Persons with autism who also have a diagnosis of mental retardation are eligible for community mental retardation services.

Although the Act of 1966 specifies that mental retardation "means subaverage general intellectual functioning which originates during the development period and is associated with impairment of: 1) Maturation, 2) Learning, and 3) Social Adjustment," it does not specify the use of a particular classification system for establishing the diagnosis for any given individual.

Properly qualified diagnosticians, therefore, may use any professionally recognized classification system for establishing these diagnoses as long as the general conditions specified in the law are met.

Professionally recognized classification systems vary somewhat in the weight they assign measured intelligence (I.Q.), and the upper limit of the development period. It is possible, therefore, that a diagnostician may determine that, though an individual with autism may have a relatively high tested I.Q., this could be offset by significantly poor adaptive behavior and result in a diagnosis of mental retardation and eligibility for mental retardation services.

**Joint Mental Health and Mental Retardation Position**

Due to the complex nature of Pervasive Development Disorders, counties are encouraged to consider the probability that both mental health and mental retardation services may be necessary to address the needs of an individual with autism appropriately and effectively. This will require close collaboration between the mental health and mental retardation components of the community service system.