

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 8, 2008

Dr. Raynard Kington, MD, PhD
Acting Director
National Institutes of Health (NIH)
1 Center Drive
Building 1, Room 244
Bethesda, MD 20892

Dear Dr. Kington,

I write to raise your awareness about a growing concern among Minnesota's Somali community. Over the past few months, I have heard from a number of constituents about an increasing rate of Somali children being diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Some have noted that while Somali children make up just 6 percent of the Minneapolis school population, they account for 17 percent of those enrolled in early childhood Autism programs.

I understand that researchers at the Minnesota Department of Health are aggressively looking into this issue with the hope of validating the current data and providing a roadmap for future research. While I look forward to reviewing the agency's findings as soon as possible, I am also aware that the current data is incomplete and will not fully represent the entire Somali community in Minnesota. As I am sure you are aware, this is critically important work not only to the Somali community, but to every family dealing with Autism. I am hopeful that we can work together in developing accurate data sources and completing more extensive research. If we do find verifiable evidence that there are more Somali children with Autism, this data could be instrumental in identifying a cause and discovering new treatments.

As we continue to investigate this issue, I am hopeful the National Institutes of Health (NIH) can provide support to Minnesota researchers in order to develop accurate data sources and identify any Somali-specific physiological or environmental factors that may be contributing to this epidemic.

Thank you in advance for your attention to this critical concern, and please do not hesitate to let my office know how we can assist the NIH in investigating this issue.

Sincerely,



Norm Coleman
US SENATE

cc: Dr. Alexander Duane, Director of National Institute of Child Health and Human Development