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Autism bill pushed

- **State measure requires** licensing of therapists
- **Backer says insurers** would be more likely to pay

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A bill that would require licensing of the behavioral therapists who help children with autism is being championed by parents who are awaiting a decision by Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo.

The measure is on the governor's desk and has passed both houses of the legislature.

An aide yesterday said the governor is reviewing the measure which, if signed into law, would require licenses and certification for therapists who work exclusively with autistic children.

"This bill is aimed at a specific population of trained professionals in applied behavioral analysis," said Deb Thivierge, executive director and founder of the Elija School in

Levittown. The school focuses on children with the neurodevelopmental condition.

If signed by Cuomo, Thivierge said, parents' insurers would be more likely to pay for services provided by certified and licensed therapists.

The measure would ensure that all professionals working as behavioral therapists for children with autism have undergone intensive training beyond the classroom, working in clinically supervised training.

Some people who work as behavior therapists hold only bachelor's degrees, while others have doctorates in education and psychology.

Dina Hutchins of Long Beach, the mother of two children with autism, said yesterday that she and her husband pay nearly \$100,000 a year for behavioral therapy and other

services for their sons, who are 9 and 11.

"If this bill is signed, it would be a godsend," she said.

Thivierge said some parents mortgage their homes to pay for the range of services required by children with autism.

"People do whatever they can to pay for these services," Thivierge said. "Some people borrow money from relatives and friends.

"It's very expensive. It's about 20 to 40 hours a week of intensive behavior-analysis therapy, and running anywhere from \$50 to \$100 an hour. So you're talking about a program that costs a fortune," she said.

"If your kid has autism, it is a 24/7 job," Thivierge said. "Their behaviors are challenging. Some kids are self-injurious or they don't speak, and applied behavior analysis really attempts to attack all of those symptoms, breaking everything down to the smallest level. One of the classic examples that they do is teach a

child to put something together, like a simple puzzle."

Some health insurers have refused to foot the bill because therapy costs are high and some therapists are unlicensed.

A measure signed by Cuomo in 2011 recognized behavior therapists as professionals specializing in autism care. The new measure, parents say, adds further credence to that law.

Parents, such as Thivierge whose son, 14, has autism, said the sessions help enhance the lives of children with the condition. She said therapists help kids with everything from inspiring the use of language to skills required for dressing, feeding and interacting socially with family and friends.

"My oldest son did not speak until he was 8," Hutchins said.

The Senate version of the bill was sponsored by Sen. Charles Fuschillo (R-Merrick). The Assembly bill was sponsored by Assemb. Joseph Morelle (D-Utica).