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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**O'Brien seeks fair treatment for people living with autism
Noted activists Bob and Suzanne Wright say Pennsylvania can lead the way**

HARRISBURG, April 18 -- House Speaker Dennis O'Brien and Sen. Jane Orie led a spirited rally at the state Capitol today and discussed legislation they are backing to ensure that insurance companies offer health coverage to people living with autism.

They were joined by national leaders in the battle against autism spectrum disorders, who said Pennsylvania can take a significant step forward in helping thousands of families avoid financial calamity by passing the insurance legislation.

"It's a new day for autism in Pennsylvania," O'Brien said. "For many years, people with this disease felt they must suffer in silence. That's no longer true. Because of the work of many people and some terrific organizations, we've reached a tipping point where America recognizes that autism is not going away and it's not staying silent."

"We must magnify and multiply the recent successes in autism diagnosis and treatment," Orie said. "This state is a national leader in expanding the boundaries of scientific knowledge about autism."

O'Brien outlined legislation he is introducing in the House to require fair treatment by insurance companies for autistic patients and their families. His bill (H.B. 1150) would require that private insurance companies provide up to \$3,000 per month in coverage for autism-related services.

Orie is sponsoring a similar bill (S.B. 605) in the Senate.

Bob and Suzanne Wright, co-founders of the national advocacy group Autism Speaks, praised O'Brien's leadership and spoke about their work to start a national conversation about the needs of people living with autism. Bob Wright is chairman of NBC/Universal.

Data released by the Centers for Disease Control in February indicates that at least one in every 150 American children now suffers from one of the autism spectrum disorders, with an even higher incidence for boys.

Public Welfare Secretary Estelle Richman talked about steps she has taken to raise the profile of autism issues in state government, including the creation earlier this year of a Bureau of Autism Services.

O'Brien praised Richman for being the most supportive welfare secretary he has dealt with since he embraced the cause of children with disabilities about 20 years ago.

"Pennsylvania is a national leader and that's largely due to Estelle's vision.

"At the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center and the University of Pennsylvania, and in dozens of service settings across Pennsylvania, significant progress is being made to find exciting new ways to address the global health crisis of autism spectrum disorders," O'Brien said.

Actor Joe Pantoliano, who has appeared in numerous films and won an Emmy Award for his work in "The Sopranos," is an advocate for people living with autism. He noted the vast effects of autism on society.

"This is a nonpartisan disease. It can strike anyone. For parents, it's as if their child has been kidnapped by a stranger," Pantoliano said.

Jon Shestack, founder of Cure Autism Now, described the struggle that many families face, including his own.

"We were told that my son didn't need and wouldn't benefit from speech therapy because of his autism," Shestack said. "The O'Brien bill for fair insurance coverage is the most compassionate legislation that's happening in the country today, and it's happening here in Pennsylvania."

The fight against autism spectrum disorders has been a top legislative priority of O'Brien for many years. When he became Speaker of the House in January, he made a commitment to use his increased visibility to help children and young adults with disabilities.

He got more than half the members of the House to enlist in the Joint House and Senate Autism Caucus, which he co-chairs with Oriole. Earlier in the day they hosted a caucus reorganization meeting for 135 legislators.

On Tuesday the House unanimously adopted another O'Brien measure (H.R. 2) designating April as Autism Awareness Month in Pennsylvania and the Speaker signed the resolution at today's rally with several children at his side.

The Pennsylvania Association of Resources for Autism and Intellectual Disabilities (PAR) assisted the Speaker's Office in researching the resolution and planning the signing ceremony. The resolution has 96 co-sponsors.