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LOOMING AUTISM, ALZHEIMER'S CRISES



MARK HENLE/THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

The Southwest Autism Research & Resource Center can be proud of its Opus West Vocational & Life Skills Academy in Phoenix.

2 CONDITIONS WE CAN'T IGNORE

Autism and Alzheimer's disease strike at the opposite ends of life. They might seem to have nothing in common, but they share a lot more than the same first letter.

Both put enormous emotional and financial strains on families, with too little relief available from outside sources. Neither has had enough research funding to understand the causes, improve treatment and, the Holy Grail, find a cure.

And we face twin crises. Demographics are making both conditions far more costly, as news stories drove home this week.

Diagnoses of autism, which includes a spectrum of neurobiological disorders, have skyrocketed. Doctors are better at identifying the disorder, which includes a mild to severe inability to communicate and relate to people. But it is also, for unknown reasons, more widespread.

Now, as *Arizona Republic* reporter John Faherty detailed on Sunday, a generation of autistic children is growing up. They need

training and the opportunity for jobs, if they're able to work. Autistic workers, with their ability to focus and enjoy repetitive tasks, have a lot to offer an employer.

But society faces an enormous and expensive challenge. While most autistic adults continue to live with their parents, they will eventually need housing, with some level of support services.

The demographics of Alzheimer's are even more alarming. The huge wave of Baby Boomers is aging, and the older they get, the greater the risk of Alzheimer's.

An Arizona-based research team, led by the Mayo Clinic, just published its findings that people carrying a gene associated with Alzheimer's begin showing signs of memory loss in their mid-50s. It's a diagnostic step forward.

But, as with autism, effective treatment and a cure are heart-breakingly elusive. These are tough economic times, but a hard look at the bottom line on these two conditions leads to a clear conclusion: We can't afford to skimp on research.