

News

CVS effort to aid disabled children

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The drugstore chain will donate \$25 million to programs that support inclusive learning activities, barrier-free playgrounds and medical rehabilitation and therapy.

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PROVIDENCE - The charitable arm of CVS Corp. will donate \$25 million over the next five years to programs around the country that aid children with disabilities.

To manage the efforts, the drugstore chain has created "**CVS All Kids Can**" -- a partnership program that includes Meeting Street School, Easter Seals and the National Center for Boundless Playgrounds. The program will direct financial support to three areas: inclusive learning activities, barrier-free playgrounds and medical rehabilitation and therapy.

The company kicked off its effort yesterday during a forum held at the Rhode Island Foundation offices in Providence during which Dr. Jose F. Cordero, the nation's assistant surgeon general, gave the keynote address.

Cordero said recent research is changing views about the development of children with disabilities. Activities that bring together such children with their peers in schools and in social settings promote cognitive and emotional development.

Cordero singled out the playground-building program as "avant- garde."

The Boundless Playgrounds center helps communities build barrier- free play areas around the country. There are more than 80 Boundless Playgrounds in 21 states in the country.

"More and more," Cordero said, "there is evidence that play is a terrific vehicle for optimal development."

John Kelly, president and executive director of Meeting Street School, said the notion that integrated play could help children with disabilities has "really started picking up steam."

Meeting Street, on Waterman Avenue in East Providence, has long been a proponent of programs that bring together disabled and non- disabled children.

The school's administrators rejected the idea of separating children based on their abilities.

It's pushing that concept further with the construction of the National Center for Excellence in Providence, the nation's first inclusive elementary and middle school in the nation. It is building the 76,000-square-foot complex off Eddy Street.

CVS was among the main donors to the \$15-million project, Kelly said, and has supported Meeting Street since the early days of the company's founding.

Funding from CVS "makes a huge difference in everything" Meeting Street does, Kelly said.

The corporation took two years to develop its "All Kids Can" program, said Eileen Howard Dunn, a company spokeswoman. Surveys of its customers, workers and others set the direction for a national awareness campaign focused on children with disabilities.

"This is a very ambitious program," Dunn said, "that may mean different things in different markets."

Working with Easter Seals, the Boundless Playgrounds center and other agencies around the country will help funnel money and the time of CVS volunteers toward localized programs that help children with disabilities and their families.

"Sometimes the struggle we have is measuring the investment," Dunn said. "At the end of this five-year period we'll be able to say we impacted a million kids."

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