

DREXEL REVS UP AUTISM EFFORTS WITH A CUSTOM-OUTFITTED VAN FOR OUTREACH AND CLINICAL ASSESSMENTS



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The A.J. Drexel Autism Institute at Drexel University can't contain its efforts within the walls of a building – so it is now hitting the road with a custom-outfitted van, called Mobile REACH, to extend autism outreach and clinical research activities into the community.

"With the mobile clinic, we'll be able to connect with diverse communities across the region to raise awareness about autism-related issues and conduct research," said **Jennifer Plumb, DSW**, director of the institute's outreach core.

A variety of health care organizations across the country have mobile health vans, but Drexel's van is the first in the region, and one of the first anywhere, to specialize in autism services.

Mobile REACH – for Resources and Education for Autism and Community Health – embodies the A.J. Drexel Autism Institute's mission to address autism as a public health issue – reducing the burden of disability associated with autism, and doing so at a wide-reaching scale.

Like popular food trucks that can bring high-quality cuisine to a variety of locations at low cost, the Mobile REACH clinic can go anywhere that services are needed and bring the clinical testing environment with it. Drexel's mobile assessment unit was custom-designed to suit the needs of conducting psycho-social, behavioral and neuro-psychological evaluations of individuals of all ages, at any location. It will also be a tool to

help people learn about the A.J. Drexel Autism Institute, resources, services and supports available to individuals with autism spectrum disorders and their families.



"By promoting early detection and early intervention for autism in communities where these services are less readily available, we want to help address disparities in outcomes for underserved populations," said **James Connell Jr., PhD**, the institute's clinical core director and an associate professor in Drexel's School of Education.

The Institute's clinical assessment teams will use the Mobile REACH van to make site visits to evaluate children taking part in research studies and participating in model programs. Visits will happen both at families' homes and on-site at community service providers such as schools and health centers.

Clinical evaluations as part of Drexel's public health research will also benefit from Mobile REACH. For example, periodic home visits are a regular part of the Early Autism Risk Longitudinal Investigation (EARLI), a major national study based at Drexel involving families with a child on the autism spectrum. Led by the A.J. Drexel Autism Institute's director, **Craig Newschaffer, PhD**, who is also a professor in Drexel's School of Public Health, the study investigates the complex causes of autism spectrum disorders by working with mothers of autistic children during a subsequent pregnancy and for three years after the birth of the new baby. EARLI investigators collect biological and environmental samples from members of participating families and from their homes, and the children also receive behavioral and developmental assessments for autism spectrum disorders.

Eventually this van may be the first of several, with potential future mobile clinics specially designed for various age groups in keeping with the Institute's emphasis on adolescent and adult population needs.

DESIGNED FOR DISABILITY AND ADAPTABILITY

The autism Mobile REACH van contains everything needed for outreach, assessment and research, down to the kitchen sink.

The vehicle's custom interior and exterior design was begun by a team of students from Drexel's Westphal College of Media Arts & Design, who competed against several other groups as part of a special Architecture + Interiors course for this purpose in 2012.





The vehicle's interior is an optimal environment for one-on-one interaction for behavioral assessments, with a small table and adjustable-size seating for a child and assessor. The van holds a small refrigerator for hygienically collecting and storing biological specimens in addition to a separate refrigerator for food storage, a sink for washing up that can be covered to blend into the countertop when not in use, movable seating so a parent can be present during their child's assessment without distracting from it, plus power outlets and storage compartments.

At the same time, the interior is comfortable for children with specific sensory needs. Features include dimmable LED lights, neutral tones and textures and insulating materials to reduce outside sounds – design elements that are consistent with the A.J. Drexel Autism Institute's clinical space in University City.

Mobile REACH is equipped with HIPAA-compliant audiovisual data capture technology for securely observing and recording assessments so they may also be used in teaching and research. The cameras can swivel or be moved to capture any angle of the assessment area, including young children doing play-based assessment activities on the padded floor. The technology is fully integrated with the audiovisual system at the institute's clinical office.

The vehicle's exterior is designed to be both inviting and adaptable. To protect the privacy of families and individuals involved in research studies, the only identifiers painted on the van itself show that it comes from Drexel University – no mention of autism. However, custom magnets with the A.J. Drexel Autism Institute name can help identify the van when it is used at public outreach events.

Additional magnets in both English and Spanish identify the van's connection to the Pennsylvania Autism Services, Education, Resources and Training Collaborative (ASERT), a state-funded collaboration providing streamlined access to autism informational resources, whose eastern regional headquarters is at Drexel.

Drexel's Mobile REACH was created with generous support from the Nancy Lurie Marks Foundation, the Lurie Family Foundation and the Philadelphia Eagles.

Community organizations, service providers or others interested in working with the A.J. Drexel Autism Institute to bring Mobile REACH to their area may contact AutismInstitute@drexel.edu or 215-571-3401.

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