Summer Camps Inspire Children Living With Sickle Cell Disease

(NAPSA)—Young adults commonly experience feelings of fear and anxiety at the prospect of becoming independent and taking on new responsibilities. For those who suffer from sickle cell disease, a potentially fatal blood disorder that affects approximately 72,000 people nationwide, those feelings are often compounded by the possibility of being ill for the rest of their lives. For many, side effects of the disease, such as episodes of severe pain and numerous physical limitations, often prevent them from having fun and enjoying summer activities with their friends.

Fortunately, there are more than sixteen summer camps around the country tailored to meet the physical and emotional needs of children with sickle cell disease that present a temporary refuge where having fun, meeting new friends and learning how to manage their disease are at the top of the agenda. Each summer, camp counselors, volunteers and medical staff provide 24-hour support, allowing children to discover new personal strengths and capabilities and learn the importance of taking responsibility for their condition.

"While having fun at camp is one of our primary goals, it is also very important that these children learn how to manage sickle cell disease, which may include blood transfusions and how to best avoid complications of the disease," said Michael DeBaun, MD, MPH Associate Professor of Pediatrics, Biostatistics and Neurology, Washington University School of Medicine and St. Louis Children's Hospital, St. Louis, MO, and member of the Gateway Sickle Cell Disease Association board, an organization that provides funding for sickle cell disease educational programs, including summer camps, in St. Louis, MO.

"Summer is the best time of the year because I get to go to camp and have lots of fun with my friends and the counselors," Capria Rogers, a camper at Camp Crescent for the past five years.

Blood transfusions, necessary for some patients with sickle cell disease, are one important aspect of disease management. Regularly scheduled blood transfusions increase the number of normal red blood cells in circulation, which in turn helps to reduce episodes of pain, risk of stroke and other complications caused by sickle cell disease. However, regular blood transfusions can result in a condition known as iron overload.

"Iron overload is a life-threatening condition which can result from necessary blood transfusions," said Dr. DeBaun. "It is critical that children with sickle cell disease who receive frequent blood transfusions are screened for iron overload and, if present, are treated with iron chelation therapy. Without treatment iron overload can have debilitating effects such as damage to the heart and liver."

While the prospect of living with sickle cell disease can be difficult to accept for patients and their families, with proper medical care and treatment, people with the condition are able to live relatively comfortable, productive lives—making routine medical care critical. These camps reinforce the importance of proper medical care and offer hope to children with sickle cell disease.

"I love being at summer camp with my friends and not having to worry about being left out of activities or feeling different," said Capria Rogers, who has been attending Camp Crescent in St. Louis, MO for five years. "Summer is the best time of the year because I get to go to camp and have lots of fun with my friends and the counselors."

To find out more information about sickle cell disease, iron overload and summer camps for children with special medical needs around the country, please visit www.toomuchiron.com/camp.