



Senate Budget and Taxation Committee

Senate Finance Committee

March 2, 2022

**SB 636: Maryland Department of Health – Waiver Programs – Waitlist Reduction Act (End the Wait Act)
Position: Support**

The Howard County Autism Society serves individuals with Autism throughout the lifespan, their families and the community in Howard County and Central Maryland. Our organization supports SB636 which would require the Maryland Department of Health to develop a plan to reduce waitlists for waiver programs by 50%, and, beginning in FY2024, require the Governor to include sufficient funds to carry out the plan in the annual budget.

One of the first things we advise newly diagnosed families when they contact the Autism Society is to “Sign up for the Autism Waiver.” It is simple enough to register and can provide funding to support residential habilitation, respite, adult life planning, environmental accessibility adaptations, family consultation, intensive individual support service, therapeutic integration for individuals with autism ages 1-21.

The Autism Waiver provides supports in the home and community. Waiver services translate into hope for parents and families with:

- Therapy services that teach our children how to function, how to live and allow the potential we know they have not only to be realized, but to thrive.
- Respite services means that parents can get a needed break without worrying if their child is being watched by someone unqualified to care for them in their absence.
- Environmental adaptations mean making physical changes to homes to enable the child to function as normally as possible while staying safe.
- Medical services grant life-sustaining treatments that enrich the quality of life.

Today, over 6,000 children and their families are waiting on the Autism Waiver Registry, most for an average of 10 years for these essential services.

When the program was created in 2001 it was intended to be a program of Early Intervention, designed to provide children and families to access services early, thus preventing lifetime reliance on more extensive, and expensive state services and supports. Unfortunately, the funding for this waiver has not kept pace with the need and many who enter the waiver registry as a child wait so long for services that they age out of eligibility before their “number” comes up.

This bill, along with its amendments, will not only add more slots to the Autism Waiver, but is intended to dig into several waiver waiting lists to see what the actual numbers are and how lists can be cleaned up to serve more people. We believe that the waiting list for the Autism Waiver alone can be reduced simply by carefully reviewing the names on it. Many people will be found ineligible, may have moved out of state, or aged out when their number comes up.



In addition to the Autism Waiver, many of our community members benefit from other DDA Waiver Services to provide critical respite, personal and medical care, and to ensure their quality of life. They need these services and supports to live, learn, work and play along Marylanders without disabilities, but they are waiting in long lines for these services. The impact on persons with Autism and other disabilities and their families is profound. **Today, there are close to 4,000 persons stranded on the Developmental Disabilities Community Pathways Waiting List with some waiting decades to access needed services.**

It is not who we are as a state and Maryland needs to do much more to prioritize the availability of services and supports for all residents with disabilities and their families. We believe SB 636 will accomplish this.

Thank you.

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