



**Testimony Before the House Judiciary Committee
February 24, 2026**

**House Bill 634 - Police Training - Autism and Dementia
LEAD Act of 2026**

Support

On behalf of the National Association of Social Workers, Maryland Chapter (NASW-MD) Committee on Aging, we would like to express our strong support for House Bill 634: Police Training – Autism and Dementia (LEAD Act of 2026).

As social workers dedicated to the well-being of Marylanders across the lifespan, we recognize that standardized training for first responders is a necessary tool for ensuring the safety and dignity of individuals with neurodivergent conditions and cognitive impairments.

Maryland is currently facing a significant public health challenge regarding cognitive health and safety. The need for the training mandated by House Bill 634 is underscored by the following data:

- **Growing Vulnerable Population:** An estimated 130,000 Marylanders are currently living with Alzheimer's, a number that has grown steadily and is projected to continue increasing.
- **High Incidence of Wandering:** Research indicates that six out of ten individuals living with Alzheimer's will wander or elope at some point during the progression of the disease.
- **Fatality Risks:** Elopement incidents are dangerous; nearly 17% of elopements for individuals with autism end in fatality, with 91% of those deaths resulting from drowning.

House Bill 634 strengthens our state's response by equipping law enforcement, firefighters, and EMTs with autism- and dementia-informed rescue and recovery considerations. From a social work perspective, this legislation is vital because:

- **Standardizes Compassionate Care:** It ensures a "same playbook" approach, moving from localized, varied responses to a consistent, statewide standard of care.
- **Supports the Caregiver Network:** Maryland family caregivers provide over 360 million hours of unpaid care annually. Standardized first-responder training reduces the trauma and burnout these families face during a crisis by improving communication and response times.
- **Trauma-Informed Response:** By focusing on risk recognition and communication, first responders can mitigate the trauma associated with search-and-rescue emergencies for non-verbal or disoriented individuals.

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The LEAD Act provides a comprehensive framework—Access, Coordination, and Training—that protects our most vulnerable citizens while supporting the professional caregivers and first responders who serve them.

We urge you to give a favorable report on House Bill 634.

Respectfully,

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