



Delaware-Maryland Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Testimony Prepared for the
Judiciary Committee
on
House Bill 0634
February 20, 2026
Position: Favorable

Chair Bartlett and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am Reverend Melody Hession-Sigmon, assistant to the bishop for public policy in the Delaware-Maryland Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, a faith community with congregations in every part of the state.

A behavioral episode shouldn't be a death sentence, but that is exactly what it was for Victor Perez, a seventeen-year-old autistic, non-speaking person with cerebral palsy who was shot and killed in his family's own yard in Idaho last year. Perez was outside with his family when he got upset, grabbed a knife, and began stumbling around the yard, which is what prompted neighbors to call 911. The police who arrived on the scene apparently had no training to recognize that it was Perez's disability that was preventing him from walking properly as he was crawling on the ground inside the fenced enclosure of his yard, so they fired 14 shots within 12 to 16 seconds of arriving.

In 2010, the ELCA published in its social message on people living with disabilities that, "all people deserve equal protection under the law. This protection includes... protection from violence, intimidation, and neglect at home, school, and in all other settings, public or private." The hard truth is that autistic people and people with other intellectual, developmental and neurological disabilities can be prone to behaviors like wandering and eloping (running away), and in these vulnerable moments they may come into contact with law enforcement. Specialized training for law enforcement can help transform these interactions, save lives, and build trust in the community.

We believe that the actions of *all* people require interdependence. Perceptions and illusions of independence equate an idealized and unreasonable human perfection with being "normal." We of the ELCA believe that God designed us *all* to depend greatly upon each other. We *all* live in the world with others who think and act



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differently. We must depend upon others in collaboration around problem-solving or even in the ordinary tasks of sharing a highway or fulfilling our relational and spiritual needs. And we are all equally made in the image of God.

We believe that law enforcement training to work with people with the disabilities recognized in **HB0634** will not only keep vulnerable people safer, but will contribute a positive shift towards more life-affirming practices in the duties of our local law enforcement to serve and protect all Marylanders.

We urge a favorable report.

Reverend Melody Hession-Sigmon