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**February 24, 2026**

**House Judiciary Committee**

**Re: House Bill 634 – Police Training - Autism and Dementia (LEAD Act of 2026)**

**Position:** Support

Dear Chair Bartlett, Vice Chair Davis, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Shari Bailey, Founder and CEO of Laila's Gift. I respectfully submit this testimony in strong support of HB 634, a cornerstone of The LEAD Act, legislation that our organization proudly championed and helped shape.

I come before you not only as an advocate, but as a mother and caregiver.

My daughter Laila was born with a rare syndrome, is diagnosed with autism, and is nonverbal. The first time she eloped, I felt a level of fear that is impossible to fully describe. In an instant, your child is gone, unable to communicate where she is, what she sees, or whether she is safe. Elopement is silent. It is swift. And far too often, it ends in tragedy.

Nearly half of children with autism are reported to wander at some point. Many are instinctively drawn to water or roadways. Drowning remains one of the leading causes of death among children with autism who elope. Wandering is equally prevalent among individuals living with dementia and can quickly result in injury, exposure, or fatal outcomes if intervention is delayed.

I share this perspective not only as a mother raising a child with complex needs, but also as someone in the sandwich generation, balancing the care of my daughter while supporting aging in-laws experiencing dementia. Elopement does not discriminate by age. It is a lifespan safety issue that impacts families across Maryland every day.



HB 634 enhances training for first responders and public safety professionals so they can more effectively recognize, understand, and safely respond to individuals with autism, dementia, intellectual disabilities, and other cognitive conditions. This legislation does not imply shortcomings in current practice. Rather, it builds upon existing systems by increasing awareness and providing specialized tools related to wandering behaviors, sensory sensitivities, communication differences, and safe reunification strategies.

When a loved one goes missing, every second matters. Preparation matters. Training saves time, and time saves lives.

As the organization that championed this legislation, Laila's Gift has worked to ensure HB 634 reflects lived experience, caregiver insight, and thoughtful implementation. We believe Maryland has the opportunity to lead the nation in creating a response framework that protects both children and adults with hidden disabilities.

For these reasons, Laila's Gift respectfully urges the Committee to issue a **Favorable Report on HB 634**. Thank you for your time and thoughtful consideration.

It's Time to LEAD.

Warm regards,

Shari Bailey  
Founder, CEO, Caregiver  
Laila's Gift