

# Testimony in Support of House Bill 634 - LEAD Act of 2026

Chairman, Vice Chair, and Members of the Judiciary Committee:

Great Afternoon. I am Reginald A. Lawson, an honored former caregiver for my late mother, a Caregiver Author (At Home with Dementia), Founder and Facilitator of A Gathering of Caregiving Men monthly support sessions, Certified First Responder Dementia Engagement Trainer.

I stand convicted in my support of House Bill 634 - The LEAD Act of 2026

This bill enhances our First Responders understandings and skills to effectively engage Autism and Dementia sufferers in the critical moments of elopement.

Elopement does not happen because of careless oversight by the caregivers. Sometimes our early-stage dementia elopers go out for a couple of minutes and return on their own. However, as they progress into mid-to-late stages of dementia's lifespan, their demented mind robs them of the ability to return.

My mother averaged six elopements a month. We only reported the elopement once in two years. She often would be standing in her front yard or at the corner, just thirty feet from her front door, unaware of where she lived. Neighbors would bring her home, startled by her attempt to open the door and come into their homes, thinking it was hers.

Elopement, the intent and actualization, is a psychological and spiritual need to run towards or from things. Our discussion during our Male Caregivers Sessions frequently reveal elopement attempts due to illogical desires or needs, such as:

- Attending a funeral that does not exist
- Visiting a non-existing hospitalized friend
- Escaping a threat in the home from strangers (family members or themselves)
- Seeking safety as a child would in a scary unfamiliar world (they want to go home)
- A need to clean the sidewalk or street
- Acting with integrity to arrive on-time for work (when they no longer are working)

Our world turns dark and frightening when elopement happens. Some of us become paralyzed and sickened with fear, and others of us become psychotic with doubt, guilt and anger assuming the worst. We dread the ring of the phone, knock at the door or arrival of a patrol vehicle.

Our trust in First Responders is at its highest and becomes our beacon of hope in our darkest moment. Finding our vulnerable loved-ones is one thing. However, how they are engaged by the First Responders, in the first critical few seconds, will determine positive (returned safe and uninjured) or negative (injured or killed) outcomes. We desperately need, when we make that call, for our willing and dedicated First Responders to be confident and enlightened on how to best achieve rescue over recovery.

The enactment of this bill strengthens our loved-ones chances for a safe return, the hope and trust of our caregivers, families and communities, and honors First Responders abilities to succeed in their mission and commitment to serve and protect.

I respectfully urge your favorable position on House Bill 634.

Humbly.