



House Judiciary Committee
February 24, 2026
House Bill 634 – *Police Training – Autism and Dementia (LEAD Act of 2026)*
POSITION: SUPPORT

The Maryland Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics (MDAAP) is a statewide association representing more than 1,100 pediatricians and allied pediatric and adolescent healthcare practitioners in the State and is a strong and established advocate promoting the health and safety of all the children we serve. On behalf of MDAAP, we submit this letter of strong **support** for House Bill 634. This legislation requires specialized training for law enforcement officers and first responders on interacting safely and effectively with individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and dementia. MDAAP suggests the following amendment to include individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities:

- Page 2, line 9 – 10: (v) Training regarding individuals with dementia, AND INTELLECTUAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES, INCLUDING autism, including training for: ...

As pediatricians, we are acutely aware that children and youth with developmental disabilities face unique safety vulnerabilities, none more urgent than the risks associated with wandering and elopement. These episodes can escalate rapidly and often require immediate, coordinated emergency response. Ensuring that our first responders have the training they need is both a public health imperative and a moral responsibility.

National data shows that approximately 49% of children with autism wander or elope from a safe environment and children with intellectual disabilities (ID) are also at elevated risk. In Maryland, the consequences of wandering have been devastating and in 2024 alone, seven children with autism drowned in our state. [\[wmar2news.com\]](http://wmar2news.com) These tragedies illustrate precisely why first responders must be equipped with specialized training in sensory-aware approaches, search and rescue considerations, communication strategies, and risk mitigation tailored to individuals with ASD, ID, and dementia.

This bill strengthens Maryland’s commitment to protecting vulnerable residents by ensuring that first responders receive standardized, evidence-informed training in:

- Recognizing and responding to wandering/elopement events.
- Understanding sensory, communication, and behavioral needs.

- Employing de-escalation strategies appropriate for neurodivergent individuals.
- Conducting searches near high-risk areas, such as bodies of water.
- Coordinating with caregivers and healthcare providers.

These training elements align with best practices recommended by national disability and safety organizations and are consistent with current public health guidance. Our Chapter fully supports Maryland's efforts to enhance first responder training. This legislation will:

- Improve outcomes in critical missing child situations.
- Reduce preventable injuries and deaths.
- Strengthen trust between families and public safety agencies.
- Promote statewide consistency in first responder preparedness.

We applaud the General Assembly for prioritizing the safety of individuals with autism, intellectual and developmental disabilities, and dementia. The evidence is clear; Maryland must ensure that first responders have the tools and training to respond effectively. For these reasons, the **MDAAP** urges a **FAVORABLE** report.

For more information call:

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