



To: Maryland House Health and Government Operations
Committee, Maryland State Legislature

Honorable Michele Guyton - Delegate

From: Howard County Autism Society

Subject: Support for HB847 – Creation of a State Coordinator Position for Autism Strategy in the
Department of Disabilities

Date: February 25, 2020

On behalf of the Howard County Autism Society, its Board of Directors and community members, we are pleased to lend our support to H847, which would create a State Coordinator position for Autism Strategy in the Department of Disabilities. As outlined in this bill, the State Coordinator would work with a Stakeholder Group to evaluate public, private, and non-profit services for individuals with autism and their families. Additionally, the Coordinator would prepare a strategic plan by July 1, 2021 for addressing, at a minimum, employment, housing, health care, training for first responders and criminal justice professionals.

While the Howard County Autism Society increasingly collaborates across disabilities through our participation in the Howard County Transition Outreach Partnership, our Family Advocacy and Parent Education Program, and other programs, we value the opportunity HB 847 presents to focus specifically on issues related to autism. In no way do we wish to pull focus or funding away from the disability community. However, the diversity of needs in the autism community and increasing rates of incidence warrant the creation of this position.

As the state with the second highest rate of autism in the country behind New Jersey, the strain on diagnostic, therapeutic, educational and adult services in our state is showing. For example, the waiting list for the Autism Waiver, is nearly five times the number of allocated slots with an eight to nine year wait for the more than 5,000 children on the waiting list. Many will reach adulthood without having benefited from this funding. Also, for those lucky enough to be approved for Autism waiver, there is a challenge in accessing funded services likely due to shortages in qualified staff. Adults with autism, too, have an increasing need for services in transportation, housing, employment and education. Our system of nonprofits, educators, therapists and families is straining to meet these necessities and it is time that a fresh set of eyes focuses on the needs of individuals with autism in Maryland. By adopting HB847, Maryland will be acknowledging the great needs of its autism community.

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Over the past few years, the Howard County Autism Society has seen a continual increase in the numbers of individuals and families seeking our services, both from Howard County and the surrounding area. We measure this in the number of calls to our special education advocate for 1:1 assistance as well as the number of adults or parents of adults looking for access to services or alternatives to long wait lists, lack of support staff, and accessible, affordable housing options.

Rates of autism diagnosis in the United States are now 1 in 59 and it is the fastest growing disability in our country. Here in Maryland, that rate is 1 in 50 and Howard County has the highest per capita incidence of autism in the state due to the tremendous services and resources available here. As these rates continue to grow, we are all working to serve a broad range of needs throughout the lifespan of persons with autism. Our organization in 2019 served individuals as young as 13 months and as old as 72. It is imperative that support systems and the community at large stay abreast of changes to present practice that will be necessary to assure effective policy. We all have a stake in the system and autism will touch all of our lives in one way or another.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.



Melissa Rosenberg
Executive Director



Patrick Boxall
Board President