



TO: House Health and Government Operations

FROM: Howard County Autism Society
Melissa Rosenberg, Executive Director

RE: HB 1176 – Voluntary 911 Registry for Individuals Needing Special Assistance

POSITION: Support

DATE: March 8, 2023

I am here today representing the Howard County Autism Society which serves the Autism community in Howard County, Montgomery County, and the surrounding areas.

We join with others in the Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities community like The Arc Maryland, People on the Go, and the Developmental Disabilities Council in supporting HB1176 which would establish the 911 Registry Program to alert first responders to certain behaviors, diagnoses or traits with which individuals with special needs may present during certain encounters with first responders. The bill would require local jurisdictions throughout the state to create 911 registry programs.

The intent of the bill is to be a voice otherwise not heard in an emergency situation. It does not replace training of first responders, which is so critical. But, we believe, a 911 registry complements it.

In 2012, the Howard County Autism Society partnered with the Howard County Police Department to create a 911 Flagging Program, so we know the strength of the program. We share regularly with our community about the voluntary registry which offers peace of mind. And we support giving first responders the tools and tips they need to be most effective.

There are so many stories positive stories we could share from the Howard County 911 Registry:

- The repeated partnerships of the police department, school system, the Autism Society, and others in working together to safely bring a child or young person home
- A non-speaking child found wandering in downtown Columbia reunited within 30 minutes with his family
- Another child found wandering near a small pond intercepted and returned safely home.



And just a word about water safety. The Autism Society regularly offers water safety training to lifeguards and swim instructors because we know that a high percentage of children with Autism wander or elope. That combined with an attraction to water of all kinds – pools, canals, ponds, lakes, rivers, drainage ditches – yield a scary statistic: *74% of Autistic children who elope/wander and die do so by drowning.* It is a safety issue for our families, particularly on this issue.

We appreciate some of the changes that have been incorporated into the bill based on feedback from the IDD community. The 911 Registry would be voluntary, confidential, and valid for one year so that contents would be automatically deleted without annual registration. Registrants can be added by a parent or guardian of a minor child as a way in which to share with first responders about their child's needs. And we have several self-advocates in our community who register themselves for that very reason and we think that is telling.

We hope that funds will be provided to address the administrative burden this could put on individual 911 systems to promote and maintain it to ensure annual updates. It is imperative that individuals who wish to no longer be on the list, particularly those who turn 18 or change their minds, can easily remove their names from the registry. Training, too, will be a key element in implementing the bill. The Autism Society along with other IDD organizations are committed to supporting that effort.

We sincerely hope that you look favorably on and pass HB 1176.

Thank you for your consideration.