

HB 1176: Public Safety- Voluntary 911 Registry
Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
March 30, 2023

Position: FAVORABLE

As the mother of a 20-year-old son with autism, I feel compelled to share my story to help committee members understand the value of this bill to families like mine. When my son was younger, I could never imagine this sweet child having the types of serious behavioral challenges that I had heard can occur with autism. Yet as he moved into puberty, my son started having behaviors which became more serious over time. I did everything I could to address these behaviors. I brought in behavioral specialists to our home, I made sure he received behavioral supports at school, and I sought help at Kennedy Krieger's Neurobehavioral Clinic. Yet we nonetheless experienced frightening episodes at home where he became dysregulated and physically aggressive. He was 6 feet tall and I am 5 foot 3 inches. I had safety equipment that I was trained to use; however, that was not adequate to keep me safe, nor to keep him safe since sometimes he would engage in self-injurious behavior such as throwing his body against a second-floor window or throwing his head into the wall.

I was terrified for both of us during these episodes. Yet I was reluctant to call the police because of my fear that they might harm my son when they showed up and saw him out of control. After many dangerous episodes where I struggled on my own, feeling desperate, I called 911. The fact that Howard County – my county – had a 911 registry in which our family was listed made it easier for me to finally make that call. It gave me hope that the officers responding to my 911 call would have read the notes I had submitted with our family's registration. Before entering our home, they would know that they needed to be a calm and supportive presence, and that my son would not pose any danger to them. And as I hoped, they showed up prepared to follow my guidance, having read our info in the registry, and helped my son calm down.

We have all heard the horrific stories of people with mental health or developmental disabilities being harmed after a 911 call by well-intentioned responding officers. Families like mine relate to these incidents with fear that our family member could be harmed if we reach out to 911. We weigh this fear against the fear of injury to our disabled family member or other family members if we don't call 911 for help. This bill will hopefully better equip responders to safely respond to such emergencies, and thereby lower the barrier for families like mine to reach out when they desperately need help.

I see no downside to this bill, as it is voluntary.

Please note, this bill does not replace the need for continued police training on how to interact with disabled individuals. Nor does it address the larger issue of the lack of crisis programs for families like mine who have an individual with an intellectual

disability and behavioral challenges. Mental health crisis programs are not trained to support a family whose member is nonverbal or has limited speech. So currently 911 is the only option for families like mine. HB1176 will make that option a safer one for all involved.

Thank you for reading my story, and considering my perspective on this bill.

If you would like more information, please feel free to contact me.

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