



**Written Testimony of Lori McIlwain,  
Co-Founder of the National Autism Association**

Judicial Proceedings Committee for Senate Bill 817: Public Safety, Missing Persons  
with Cognitive Impairment – *Purple Alert Program*  
February 27, 2024

Just under two weeks ago in Belle Grade, Florida, a nonverbal, [five-year-old-boy with autism](#) wandered off in the evening hours. He was located deceased underwater several hours later. Two weeks before that in Webster, Massachusetts, a [four-year-old boy with autism](#) left the supervision of his babysitter. He slipped out through a window and headed to a nearby river. Right as he entered the water, a group of responding officers scooped him up just in time.

Two similar cases. Two very different outcomes. Both are exceptionally common in the autism community. Currently, research shows that:

- One in 36 children have a diagnosis of autism, according to Centers for Disease Control
- Of those diagnosed with autism, nearly 50% are at risk of going missing, according to a study in [Pediatrics](#)
- [Drowning](#) is the leading cause of wandering-related deaths, accounting for more than 70% of fatalities, according to studies from both the National Autism Association and National Center for Missing & Exploited Children

Much like the two stories already shared, [my son](#) went missing from his school. Around that same time, another little boy with autism went missing several states away.

Same age. Same diagnosis. Different outcome. My child came home safe.

Since then, I have studied – and consulted on – hundreds of missing person cases involving a child/adult with autism. I have seen far too many communities devastated by long mass searches that end in tragedy. I have seen neighbors and bystanders heartbroken that they did not know to intervene because of the normal appearance autism often presents. I have witnessed state alert systems go unused by agencies because the alerts are branded for – and assumed to only be for – a particular age group, regardless of the actual criteria.

At the National Autism Association, we believe that a distinct alert like the *Purple Alert System* will bridge the safety gap and add a critical layer of protection for those at highest risk. It would be **most valuable for our most vulnerable** population.

Our children will head straight to your neighbor's pond, or the community lake, or your local hotel pool. Many do not speak or are unable to answer to their name. They do not respond to words like "stop" in a typical way. It's critical they have a specific alert system that aligns with their unique



needs and patterns; an alert that will become easily recognized by law enforcement, SAR personnel, and good Samaritans to bring our most vulnerable Maryland citizens home safely.

In fact, a Purple Alert has strong potential to prevent mass searches, tragedies, and reduce the use of agency resources by involving the general public who can simply search water that is close by. As an advocate with a 30-year career in brand strategy, I strongly believe a unique alert system will not only hasten search efforts but will also bring **actionable awareness and education to Maryland agencies and residents.**

Last week, I was struck by the story of one of your Delegates. She shared how she was a person who once found a child with autism in the water, already gone. It's devastating on so many levels. I can't help but imagine another scenario: she heard there was a Purple Alert, so she checked nearby water and got there in time – just like those officers.

Maryland has been a model state for police training and education. Your state's response record and program implementation has been spoken of highly and repeatedly during training sessions and conferences across the U.S. As other states enact Purple Alerts, or propose systems like [Ian Alert](#) after a loss, it is my sincere hope that Maryland continues to *proactively* lead the way in protecting those most vulnerable, and act as a guide for other states to follow.

Thank you for your leadership, and your consideration.

With hope,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Lori McIlwain' in a cursive script.

Lori McIlwain  
Connor's mom