



Written Testimony on SB 797
Autism Society of America
and Autism Society of Maryland
Submitted to Maryland House Ways and Means Committee

March 25, 2024

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Dear Chairwoman Atterbeary and other members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding SB 797, a bill to create the Access to Attorneys, Advocates, and Consultants for the Special Education Program.

My name is Delancy Allred and I am submitting this testimony on behalf of the Autism Society of America and the Autism Society of Maryland. The Autism Society of America is the nation's oldest and largest grassroots organization representing individuals on the Autism spectrum and their families. The Autism Society envisions a world where individuals and families living with Autism can maximize their quality of life, are treated with the highest level of dignity, and live in a society where their talents and skills are appreciated and valued. Along with our 70+ affiliates nationwide, we provide advocacy, education, information and referral, support, and community engagement opportunities at national, state, and local levels. Our Maryland affiliate, the Autism Society of Maryland, works with families and Autistic individuals in Montgomery, Howard, and Anne Arundel Counties, providing information and referral services, educational workshops, social and support groups, and social event. The affiliate is led by Melissa Rosenberg.

Special education attorneys, advocates, and consultants play a key role in helping families and caregivers navigate the complex IEP process. Given the complexity of federal, state, and local laws and regulations pertaining to the Individuals with Disabilities Educate Act (IDEA), many parents and caregivers often are not aware of all the protections available for their child or loved one. The process of being identified, evaluated, accessed, and developing the IEP team to create the educational plan is very overwhelming and comes with high emotion. Under IDEA, authority is given to advocates authorized by the parent to inspect and review the records and attend the meetings. However, it is challenging for families and caregivers to find experts and be able to afford them, and that is only if they are aware that they have the right to rely on an expert.

Senate Bill 797 would authorize and establish a fund for families and caregivers to work with attorneys, advocates, and consultants to help them navigate the special education process. We appreciate that this legislation would ensure parents are provided with written information letting them know about the program, and their right to have an expert with them throughout the process. This notice must be clear and written to ensure it is understandable and in plain language and/or translated into other languages as needed. We also appreciate that the notice will also be given to parents who utilize the mediation process. Mediation is a complex legal process that can be overwhelming. In addition, the bill creates a network of lawyers, advocates, and consultants who can take cases under the program. The bill mandates training for these individuals and requires input from those with lived experiences. Nonprofits are authorized by

the bill to provide consultation for this training. Overall, we are in full support of this legislation as it is critical to help families and caregivers access needed expertise as they navigate the IEP process. We encourage robust marketing of this program to families and the potential network of lawyers and advocates. We also look forward to working with the network to ensure strong training and awareness in engaging with these families, students, and school systems.

We look forward to working with the Maryland legislature to make this necessary change. Thank you for considering the testimony of the Autism Society of America and Autism Society of Maryland as this bill moves forward. If you have any questions, please contact Delancy Allred, State Policy Coordinator at dallred@autismsociety.org