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Legislative District 28
Charles County

Ways and Means Committee

Subcommittees

Local Revenues

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House Delegation



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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES

ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony in Support of HB1163 Task Force to Study Fencing for Bodies of Water and Playgrounds

Good afternoon, Chair Pena-Melnyk, Vice Chair Cullison, and members of the House Health and Government Operations Committee. For the record, I am Delegate Edith Patterson, sponsor of HB1163 - Task Force to Study Fencing for Bodies of Water and Playgrounds.

This legislation is inspired by the heartbreaking story of a five-year-old boy from Charles County. This young boy was autistic and non-verbal. Tragically, he drowned after wandering away from a supervised area. Meeting with his parents and members of the Autism Community in Charles County opened my eyes to a devastating reality: drowning is the leading cause of death for autistic children and adults.

What I learned was deeply concerning—nearly half of children with autism are at risk of wandering away from safe environments. This behavior, known as "elopement," is often paired with an attraction to water and an inability to recognize its dangers. The result is an alarming number of preventable tragedies.

In response, I have introduced two critical pieces of legislation. One focuses on elopement reporting, while this bill establishes a Workgroup to Study Fencing. The workgroup's mission is to evaluate and recommend practical measures to protect children at risk of elopement. Specifically, it will:

1. **Assess Fencing Requirements for Bodies of Water:** The workgroup will review current standards and propose ensuring bodies of water are completely enclosed with sturdy fencing that meets modern safety standards.
2. **Evaluate Fencing for Playgrounds:** It will also study fencing requirements for playgrounds managed by housing corporations, condominium associations, or homeowners' associations to ensure these areas are safe and enclosed.

These measures are essential to safeguard children with autism and prevent future tragedies. By studying infrastructure solutions like fencing, we can create safer environments for children at risk of elopement. We owe it to families in our community to take proactive steps to protect their children and ensure their safety.

We have one amendment for consideration – to add two representatives to the Task Force. I respectfully urge you to vote favorably for this legislation. Together, we can honor this young boy's memory by creating a safer, more inclusive environment for children and adults with autism.

Thank you for your consideration,

Edith Patterson
Charles County