



THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony in SUPPORT of HB 1117: Virginia I. Jones Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementias Council and the Advisory Stakeholder Group on Autism-Related Needs - Recommendations for Elopement Response Devices

Summary: House Bill 1117, as amended, establishes clear statutory recognition of elopement response devices as assistive technology or medical safety devices under Maryland law, ensuring consistent terminology and classifications across state programs now, and in the future. These devices, often GPS-enabled, allow caregivers and first responders to quickly locate individuals who wander from safe environments, a common and dangerous occurrence in both the autism and dementia communities.

Background: Wandering, often called elopement, occurs when a person leaves a safe area or caregiver supervision and becomes lost or disoriented. This behavior is particularly common among individuals with autism and those living with Alzheimer's disease or related dementias. [According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), about half of children and youth with autism spectrum disorder have been reported to wander from a safe environment at some point, sometimes quickly and even under close supervision. When this happens, families are often left searching desperately for their loved one while they face immediate risks such as a traffic injury or drowning.

For many families, the threat of wandering is constant. [Research indicates that nearly half of children with autism attempt to wander after age four](#), and roughly one in four incidents results in the child being missing long enough to cause significant concern. Wandering behavior is also common among individuals with dementia; [studies estimate that around 60% of people with dementia will wander at least once](#), and when they become lost the consequences can be severe.

The risks associated with elopement are profound. [Drowning is the leading cause of death for children with autism following wandering episodes](#), and the risk of drowning can be dramatically higher than for other children. In many cases, individuals who wander may not recognize danger or may be unable to communicate their name, address, or recognize that they need help. This creates significant danger not only for the individual but also for families, caregivers, and the broader community when search efforts must be mobilized.

[These situations frequently require rapid responses from local law enforcement, fire departments, and emergency personnel](#). In fact, many missing-person incidents involving individuals with



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autism or dementia begin at home and require coordinated searches of neighborhoods, parks, roads, and nearby waterways. For families and first responders alike, every minute matters.

How Elopement Response Devices Work:

These devices often use GPS or similar technology to help caregivers and authorized responders quickly locate a missing person. When a wandering incident occurs, the ability to identify an individual's real-time location can dramatically reduce the time required to conduct search operations and can significantly increase the likelihood of a safe recovery. [Research indicates that location tracking technologies can substantially reduce search time and improve outcomes](#) when individuals wander from safe environments.

For families caring for a loved one with autism or dementia, these devices provide an additional layer of protection while preserving dignity and independence. Parents of children with autism often describe the challenge of maintaining constant supervision while still allowing their children to learn, play, and participate in community life. Similarly, caregivers of individuals with Alzheimer's disease face the difficult balance between safety and independence for loved ones who may become disoriented and wander.

GPS-enabled response devices help bridge that gap. They allow families to respond quickly if someone leaves a safe environment and allow first responders to begin searches with crucial location information rather than starting from a place where the individual was last seen. In many cases, this technology can transform a potentially life-threatening search into a rapid and safe recovery.

Bill Overview: (As Introduced and Context for Current Version):

As originally introduced, House Bill 1117 addressed this challenge by proposing insurance coverage requirements for medically necessary elopement response devices, including under private insurance and public programs. However, the bill has since been substantially amended. The current version no longer includes any insurance coverage mandate, Medicaid provision, or reimbursement requirement.

Instead, the amended bill focuses solely on statutory classification, ensuring that individuals who are medically determined to be at risk of elopement can have these devices recognized within



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Maryland law as appropriate assistive technology or medical safety devices when referenced in state programs or policy contexts.

Amendments to HB 1117:

The amended version of HB 1117 substantially refines and narrows the bill's original scope. Key changes include:

- **Elimination of all insurance coverage mandates, including Medicaid:** eliminates the fiscal note from the bill entirely.
- **Edits the classification:** from durable medical equipment (DME) to assistive technology or medical safety equipment allowing them to still qualify for Health Savings Accounts (HSA) and Individualized Education Programs (IEP). These categories are still integrated into insurance coverage frameworks though this bill does not modify assistance programs or insurance parts of Maryland Law.
- Replacement of coverage-focused language with a pure definitional framework.

What remains in the amended bill:

- **Establishes a statutory definition** of “elopement response devices”
- **Ensures consistent terminology** in Maryland law when these devices are referenced in State policy or programmatic contexts

Application of the Definition in Maryland Law:

The amended bill inserts this definition into two key areas of the Annotated Code of Maryland, which gives the term practical meaning across existing State programs:

- *Article – Health – General, §13–3201*
 - Ensures that, within health-related State programs, these devices can be recognized alongside other assistive technologies and safety supports
 - Provides a consistent legal reference point for agencies when interpreting eligibility, program design, or service delivery involving assistive technology



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- Connects the devices, and the issue of elopement and wandering, with our statewide dementia response system and related policies to recognize it as a public safety and health systems issue.
- *Article – Human Services, §7-112.1:*
 - Applies the definition within the Developmental Disabilities Administration (DDA) statutory framework, including in educational settings.
 - Supports consistent recognition of these devices in person-centered planning, service coordination, and programmatic guidance.
 - Elopement response devices will now be understood as legitimate support and safety-related intervention tools.
 - Creates a uniform understanding statewide and supports consistent treatment across regions, providers, and cases.
 - Aligns these devices, and the issue of elopement and wandering, with Federal HCBS (Home and Community-Based Services) requirements and state obligations to ensure participant safety.

In short, the amended bill does not create any new benefit, mandate, or reimbursement obligation. Instead, it provides a clear and consistent legal definition for future reference in State programs and policy discussions.

Conclusion: Wandering or elopement remains one of the most dangerous and distressing challenges faced by families caring for individuals with autism, Alzheimer’s disease, and related dementias. In a matter of seconds, a loved one can leave a safe environment and face life-threatening risks from traffic accidents, injury, or drowning.

While the amended HB 1117 no longer establishes coverage requirements, it still plays an important role by formally recognizing elopement response devices in Maryland law as assistive technology and medical safety devices. This clarity in statute supports consistent understanding across State programs and acknowledges the importance of these tools in protecting vulnerable Marylanders.

House Bill 1117, as amended, reflects an important step in recognizing the role of safety technology in supporting individuals at risk of elopement, their families, and the public safety professionals who respond when emergencies occur.

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