



Shari Bailey
CEO & Founder, Laila's Gift
1040 Hardees Drive
Suite F
Aberdeen, MD 21001
info@lailasgift.org
443-509-4515

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Senate Judiciary Committee

Re: Senate Bill 745 – Police Training - Autism and Dementia (LEAD Act of 2026)

Position: Support

Dear Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Shari Bailey, Founder and CEO of Laila's Gift. I write in strong support of SB 745, a key pillar of The LEAD Act — legislation our organization proudly championed and helped develop. I am not only an advocate. I am a mother and caregiver.

My daughter Laila was born with a rare syndrome and is also diagnosed with autism and is nonverbal. The first time she eloped, I experienced a fear no parent should ever have to feel — the terrifying realization that your child is missing and unable to communicate danger, location, or distress. Elopement happens silently and quickly. And too often, it ends tragically.

Research shows that nearly half of children with autism will wander at some point. Many are drawn to water or traffic. Drowning remains one of the leading causes of death for children with autism who elope. For individuals living with dementia, elopement is also common and can result in injury, exposure, or death if not located quickly.

I share this not only as a mother of a child with special needs, but also as someone in the sandwich generation — raising a child with complex needs while supporting aging in-laws navigating dementia. Elopement is not confined to one age group. It is a lifespan issue affecting families across Maryland every single day.

SB 745 strengthens training for first responders and public safety professionals so they are better prepared to recognize, understand, and safely respond to individuals with autism, dementia, intellectual disabilities, and other cognitive conditions. This bill does not suggest inadequacy in current systems. Instead, it enhances awareness and equips responders with tools specific to wandering behaviors, sensory differences, communication barriers, and reunification best practices.



When someone goes missing, time is everything. Training saves time. Training saves lives.

As the champion organization behind this legislation, Laila's Gift has worked to ensure this proposal reflects lived experience, caregiver input, and practical implementation. We believe Maryland can lead the nation in building a response system that protects both children and adults with hidden disabilities.

For these reasons, Laila's Gift respectfully urges the Committee to issue a **Favorable Report on SB 745**.

Thank you for your time and thoughtful consideration.

It's Time to LEAD.

Warm regards,

Shari Bailey
Founder, CEO, Caregiver
Laila's Gift