



TO: Montgomery County Council

FROM: Howard County Autism Society
Melissa Rosenberg, Executive Director

RE: Bill 33-23 Voluntary 911 Registry

POSITION: Support

DATE: September 12, 2023

I am submitting this testimony on behalf of the Howard County Autism Society which serves the Autism community in Howard, Montgomery, and Anne Arundel Counties, as well as the surrounding areas.

We join with others in the Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities community in supporting Bill 33-23 introduced by Councilmember Luedtke. The bill would establish a Voluntary 911 Registry Program to alert first responders to certain behaviors, diagnoses, or traits with which individuals with special needs may present during certain encounters with first responders.

This legislation was inspired by HB1176 which was sponsored by Delegate Atterbeary (D-13) last session to create a statewide 911 registry. That bill cleared the House but got stuck in the Senate. We are optimistic that 2024 will see its passage and with our continued support.

The intent of both bills is to be a voice otherwise not heard in an emergency situation. It does not replace training of first responders, which is so critical. But, we believe, a 911 registry complements it.

In 2012, the Howard County Autism Society partnered with the Howard County Police Department to create a 911 Flagging Program, so we know the strength of the program. We share regularly with our community about the voluntary registry which offers peace of mind. And we support giving first responders the tools and tips they need to be most effective. There are many positive stories we could share from the Howard County 911 Registry:

- The repeated partnerships of the police department, school system, the Autism Society, and others in working together to safely bring a child or young person home
- A non-speaking child found wandering in downtown Columbia reunited within 30 minutes with his family
- Another child found wandering near a retaining pond intercepted and returned safely home.



And just a word about water safety. The Autism Society offers water safety training to lifeguards and swim instructors because we know that a high percentage of children with Autism wander or elope. That combined with an attraction to water of all kinds – pools, canals, ponds, lakes, rivers, drainage ditches – yield a scary statistic: *74% of Autistic children who elope/wander and die do so by drowning*. It is a safety issue for our families, particularly on this issue.

The 911 Registry should be voluntary and confidential. Registrants can be added by a parent or guardian of a minor child as a way in which to share with first responders about their child's needs. We have several adult self-advocates in our community who register themselves for that very reason and we think that is telling.

We encourage the Council to provide funds that will address any administrative burden this could put on the 911 system to promote and maintain it. It is imperative that individuals who wish to no longer be on the list, particularly those who turn 18 or change their minds, can easily remove their names from the registry. Training, too, will be a key element in implementing the bill. The Autism Society along with other IDD organizations are committed to supporting that effort.

We hope that you look favorably on and pass Bill 33-23.

Thank you for your consideration.