

Senator Rhonda Fields, Chair
Senator Joann Ginal, Vice Chair
Committee on Public & Behavioral Health & Human Services

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Monday, April 26, 2021

Support for HB21-1122, First Responder Interactions Persons With Disabilities

The Autism Society of Colorado is a nonprofit organization committed to improving the lives of autistic individuals across the state of Colorado through advocacy, information and education. We strongly support HB21-1122, which would establish a commission to improve the quality of first responder interactions with persons with disabilities.

The national prevalence rate of autism is 1 in 54. Therefore, it is inevitable that first responders will encounter someone with autism in their work. Autism is a developmental disability that can impair social interaction, communication and behavior. These challenges can be exponentially increased by anxiety-inducing interactions with first responders and, more specifically, with law enforcement officers.

In many cases, law enforcement officers misperceive the traits of autism as a sign of criminal activity, noncompliance or even a threat. Autistic individuals often have challenges with language processing speed, sensory overload and difficulty interpreting facial expressions and body language. Failure to comply with an officer's request may be a manifestation of their disability and not indicative criminal intent or a potential threat.

There is a disproportionate number of children with autism and other neurodiversities who are subject to discipline from school resource officers who are not trained to work with autistic children. Autistic children of color are even more at risk for harsh treatment from untrained school resource officers.

Comprehensive education and training for first responders on autism and other developmental disabilities are imperative to improve interactions and keep all parties involved safe. Without specific training, a first responder may not recognize that they may need to modify their approach when responding to a person with autism or developmental disability.

The Autism Society of Colorado believes HB21-1122 is a significant step toward safer communities for autistic individuals. We urge the committee to pass HB21-1122. Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

Senate Health & Human Services

HB21-1122 First Responder Interactions Persons With Disab

Typed Text of Testimony Submitted

Name, Position, Representing	Typed Text of Testimony
<p>Mike Foley For Colorado Fraternal Order of Police</p>	<p>Madam Chair and members of the Senate Health and Human Services Committee, thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony on HB 21-1122. I am here today representing the Colorado Fraternal Order of Police in support of HB 21-1122.</p> <p>I have been a police officer for 6 years, 3 of which have been spent as a dedicated officer on my police department's Crisis Response Team. Our unit follows a co-responder model which pairs police officers with mental health professionals. Our primary mission is to respond to calls involving people who suffer from mental health illnesses and people who have intellectual and developmental disabilities. Our goal is to deescalate situations and to divert people from the criminal justice system to hospitals and community mental health centers. Since the inception of our program in 2018, we have intervened on approximately 6,000 calls for service involving mental health. The outcome of those calls have been overwhelmingly positive and have resulted in those subjects getting connected to appropriate resources.</p> <p>I attribute the success of this program to be largely predicated on the training our crisis officers have been fortunate to receive. Officers specially trained in crisis intervention have the knowledge and tools to deal with austere situations. Unfortunately, not all officers statewide have the opportunity to receive equal training due to budget constraints and resources depending on the size of their department. It's my contention that mandating such training while simultaneously allocating resources, would be beneficial for both officers and the citizens they serve. Standardized mental health training would mitigate critical incidents and allow every citizen with a disability to be heard and respected when encountering police officers. Therefore, I would like to offer my support in favor of this bill. This legislative action will give all first responders the critical training they need to successfully provide exemplary service that their citizens deserve.</p>

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	<p>Finally, I would like to thank Senator Kolker, Representative Froelich, and Representative Larson for the hard work and attention they put into this bill. Without their dedication, this bill would not have come to fruition. Thank you.</p>
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