

# UNIFORMED PROFESSIONAL FIRE FIGHTERS ASSOCIATION OF CONNECTICUT

AFFILIATED WITH INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE FIGHTERS

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Rick Hart  
Director  
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February 14, 2019

## Testimony in support of HB 5156

### **AAC concerning first responder training for incidences involving juveniles with autism spectrum disorder and nonverbal learning disorder**

Good afternoon, Honorable Chairmen Rep. Verrengia and Sen. Bradley, members of the Public Safety and Security Committee, my name is Rick Hart of the Uniformed Professional Firefighters Association of Connecticut which represents 60 Local affiliates of the International Association of Firefighters.

Membership in the UPPFA is comprised of approximately 4,000 Union fire fighters in Connecticut. I am providing this written testimony in support of HB 5156.

Imagine the gut wrenching feeling of having a child wander off in a crowded situation when you get distracted for a split second. Imagine if that child has autism and does not relate or interact with society as a child that has not been diagnosed with autism. The fear is real, the anguish is real, and the feeling of helplessness is real. It happened to my family. I have a son with autism. He is 25 years old today, but when he was 3, he wandered away from our house. I had left to play golf and my wife called me in a panic that she couldn't find our son. We had a picket fence in the front yard, and a chain linked fence in the back yard. My son figured out how to open the fence and he ran up the street to follow me, unbeknownst to my wife. This happened in a matter of seconds. Thankfully, we had great neighbors that were able to coax our son to safety and call us to let us know he was safe.

I was returning home from a 24 shift when I came across a 3-4 year old child in just a diaper on the sidewalk. I called 911, identified myself as a Deputy Chief in the Waterbury Fire Department, and relayed the necessary information. I knew right away that the child was on the autism spectrum; he was nonverbal, averted his gaze, and did not interact with me. Had I not had a child with autism, I would have been clueless as to what to do or how to handle this situation. Fortunately, the child's father saw

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the police lights and came out to identify himself as the child's father and the child was returned to his parents.

This happens all too often given the explosion of autism spectrum diagnoses. By providing ALEC (Autism and Law Enforcement Coalition) training, it would provide a vital tool to first responders in the response and mitigation of an incident involving a child on the autism spectrum. The ALEC program was developed by Massachusetts fire department Captain Bill Cannata. This training enables first responders to recognize the signs of autism and effectively handle a situation involving a child on the spectrum. This is a program that will drastically change an incident in a positive manner if responders are properly trained and exposed to the idiosyncrasies of a child with autism.

Therefore, as an organization, the UPFFA supports and requests HB 5616 move forward.

Thank you,

*Richard Hart*

Rick Hart

Director, Legislative and Political Affairs

Uniformed Professional Firefighters Association

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