



**Testimony of Shannon Jacovino, Director of Advocacy & Public Policy, The Arc Connecticut
In Support of HB 5156 An Act Concerning First Responder Training for Incidents Involving Juveniles with Autism
Spectrum Disorder and Nonverbal Learning Disorder.**

February 14, 2019

Thank you, Senator Bradley, Representative Verrengia and the members of the Public Safety and Security Committee for the opportunity to testify in support of HB 5156 An Act Concerning First Responder Training for Incidents Involving Juveniles with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Nonverbal Learning Disorder. Thank you as well to Representative Zawistowski for introducing this bill and for bringing awareness this issue.

On behalf of The Arc Connecticut, the state's oldest and largest advocacy organization for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) and their families, I am submitting testimony in support of Senate Bill 1 - An Act Concerning Paid Family and Medical Leave and House Bill 5003 – An Act Implementing A Paid Family Medical Leave Program

The Arc was founded more than 65 years ago by parents who believed that their loved ones with I/DD should have the opportunity to live, work and play in their communities just like everyone else; and we have remained committed to promoting and protecting the civil and human rights of people with I/DD ever since. We are truly a parent-led civil rights movement. In Connecticut, our 14 Arc local chapters deliver over \$100 million in jobs and supports to thousands of people in 162 communities.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disability that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges. There is often nothing about how people with ASD look that sets them apart from other people, but people with ASD may communicate, interact, behave, and learn in ways that are different from most other people. ASD is reported to occur in all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups and it is about 4 times more common among boys than among girls. The most recent data from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimate that about 1 in 59 children have ASD.

Every day, first responders encounter individuals in need of assistance. No two emergencies are the same and neither are the individuals involved. This is especially true when it comes to individuals with ASD. Although all first responders are trained to react to a variety of emergency and crisis situations, the typical response is not always the correct response when interacting with individuals with ASD.

Individuals with ASD may not understand what others need or want from them, they may have trouble communicating, and they may not comprehend that their actions and words could negatively impact themselves or others. This can lead to a variety of behaviors and responses that first responders may not understand including:

- Difficulty maintaining eye contact. This may be misinterpreted by law enforcement as suspicious or defiant. Unfortunately, without adequate autism awareness training, an encounter with an autistic individual can lead to a rapid escalation that ends in injury or death.
- Remaining unresponsive when asked questions and finding it difficult to comply with verbal commands.
- Becoming agitated in the event of a new situation, loud noise, the presence of a stranger or an unanticipated surprise.
- Responding to agitation with actions that may be mistaken as a sign of hostility, intoxication or criminal intent.

This can be especially problematic when in interactions with first responders, particularly law enforcement officials, who may misinterpret these responses as suspicious or defiant. Unfortunately, without adequate autism awareness training, an encounter with an autistic individual can lead to a rapid escalation that ends in injury or death.

The significant number of CT residents with ASD, and the substantial rise in the overall number of individuals who have ASD, make autism training essential for police officers, firefighters, emergency medical technicians (EMTs) and paramedics. Incorporating autism awareness training into the routine requirements for all first responders gives them the information they need to protect and serve the public, make optimal use of their time and avoid mistakes that could lead to traumatic experiences for all of those involved.

Shannon Jacovino
The Arc Connecticut
200 Research Parkway
Meriden, CT 06450
sjacovino@thearcct.org