



## Support the Autism Commission

SB1232 - Senator Aird (Chief Patron)  
HB1772 – Delegate Hope (Chief Patron)

We urge legislators to recognize the critical need for policies, funding, and services that address the unique challenges associated with autism. While many needs overlap across the I/DD community, autism presents distinct and specific gaps that require targeted attention. Establishing a dedicated Autism Commission would ensure these gaps are identified and addressed, particularly in areas such as education, healthcare, employment, housing, and independent living supports. By doing so, we can complement existing efforts for all developmental disabilities while filling critical needs that are currently underserved.

### Why Do We Need a Commission?

- **Autism’s Unique Characteristics:** A commission can focus on creating policies specifically designed to address communication differences, sensory processing challenges, and executive functioning deficits faced by this population, ensuring resources and support systems are appropriately aligned. Approximately 30% of autistic people have intellectual disability, but autism is not solely defined by intellectual challenges.
- **Employment Crisis:** Research shows that autistic adults face disproportionately high unemployment rates compared to individuals with other disabilities. A commission can advocate for autism-friendly workplace policies, tax incentives for inclusive hiring practices, and programs that match individuals on the spectrum with supportive employers.
- **Equity and Data-Driven Policy Development:** Autism affects all races, socioeconomic backgrounds, and genders, but access to diagnosis and services is often inequitable. Many existing policies for individuals with disabilities do not adequately capture the unique experiences of the autism community because of a lack of data specific to autism. A commission can bring stakeholders together, hold agencies accountable, and fund autism-specific research to inform evidence-based policymaking.

- **Family Support:** Families of autistic individuals bear significant financial, emotional, and logistical burdens due to the high cost of therapies, inadequate public support, and limited respite care options. A commission could propose policy solutions that include expanded funding for therapies and services, increased access to family support programs, and enhanced caregiver training and resources.
- **Growing Prevalence and Lifelong Support Needs:** The CDC estimates that 1 in 36 children are diagnosed with autism, and autism is a lifelong condition. A commission could ensure policies address a person’s entire lifespan, including access to independent or supported living options and services for aging individuals with autism.

**Take Action:** Support the Autism Commission. By addressing gaps and building a comprehensive framework, an autism-specific commission would not only empower individuals with autism but also benefit society by tapping into the strengths and potential of this diverse community.

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# Support the Autism Commission

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**Autism is the fastest-growing developmental disability in the United States. Despite this growth, services are often not readily available or accessible to everyone in the autism community.**

## By the Numbers:

**Rising Need for Services:** Annual reports from DBHDS show a 339% increase in the number of individuals with autism using Developmental Disabilities (DD) services through Community Services Boards (CSBs) from 2011 to 2022. In 2011, 8.85% of individuals using DD services had autism; by 2016, it was 14.67%, and by 2022, it reached 30.04%. This dramatic increase highlights the growing need for autism-specific services.

**Focus on Autism Research:** The federal Autism CARES Act, reauthorized in December 2024, emphasizes autism-specific research aligned with the community's evolving needs. A critical gap identified in the research is the lack of data on transition-age youth and young adults with autism. Most federally funded studies focus on children up to age 18, neglecting youth who don't qualify for school services under IDEA or young adults transitioning to independent living and adult services. There's a clear need for enhanced ASD surveillance and exploratory studies for this age group to better support their transition to adulthood.

While broader I/DD initiatives play an important role in supporting individuals with a range of disabilities, autism's complex profile requires targeted, specific attention in policy and service provision. By establishing an Autism Commission that will research and invest in autism-specific services, training, and supports, we can ensure that individuals with autism are not left behind and are given the opportunity to lead fulfilling, independent lives.

**Health Challenges and Premature Death:** Autistic individuals have higher rates of coexisting physical and mental health conditions compared to non-autistic individuals. The premature death rate among autistic individuals is twice as high as non-autistic people. Autistic adults report experiencing significantly more unmet healthcare needs than their non-autistic peers, particularly in navigating the healthcare system as they transition to adulthood.

**Caregiver Strain:** Many individuals with autism require significant assistance with daily activities, such as self-care, mobility, and communication. This assistance is mainly provided by family caregivers, who face high levels of stress and health challenges compared to caregivers of typically developing individuals or those caring for individuals with other developmental disabilities. The strain on caregivers underscores the need for comprehensive support systems not only for autistic individuals but also for their families to alleviate the impact on their health and well-being.

**States with Autism Commissions:** The Massachusetts Autism Commission has implemented impressive initiatives that could be replicated in Virginia, including a coordinated statewide approach to autism services that emphasizes access, equity, data-driven decision making, public awareness campaigns, stakeholder collaboration, and a focus on employment and transition services. Additionally, the Massachusetts Developmental Disabilities Council serves individuals with developmental disabilities and their families, and both of these organizations work together to enhance independence, productivity, and inclusion.