

STRATEGIC PLAN FOR ADDRESSING AUTISM-RELATED NEEDS
2026 ANNUAL REPORT

State Coordinator for Autism Strategy

July 2026

Carol A. Beatty, Secretary
Anne Blackfield, Deputy Secretary

Wes Moore, Governor
Aruna Miller, Lt. Governor



June 30, 2026

The Honorable Wes Moore
Governor of Maryland
State House
Annapolis, MD 21401

The Honorable William C. Ferguson
President of the Senate
State House
Annapolis, MD 21401

The Honorable Joseline A. Peña-Melnyk
Speaker of the House of Delegates
State House
Annapolis, MD 21401

Secretary Carol Beatty
Maryland Department of Disabilities
217 E. Redwood Street
Baltimore, MD 21202

RE: FY 2026 Annual Report on the Autism Strategic Plan

Dear Governor Moore, President Ferguson, Speaker Peña-Melnyk, and Secretary Beatty:

Please accept this letter as the formal submission of the Annual Autism Strategy report for Fiscal Year 2026, as required by the Maryland Human Services Code § 7-111. This report details the progress made during the first year of our five-year Autism Strategic Plan.

Over the past year, we have made significant strides in advancing the plan's mission. We are thankful for the dedicated efforts of the Advisory Stakeholder Group for Autism Related Needs (ASGARN), which convened five times this fiscal year. While we celebrate these accomplishments, this report also highlights critical areas for continued focus.

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We look forward to our continued partnership with the Administration and the General Assembly to build an inclusive Maryland where all autistic residents have the opportunity to lead healthy, fulfilling, and self-directed lives as integral members of their communities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Victoria Rodríguez-Roldán', written in a cursive style.

Victoria Rodríguez-Roldán, J.D.
Statewide Autism Coordinator
Maryland Department of Disabilities



Autism Strategy

2026 Annual Report

Submitted pursuant to Maryland Human Services Article, § 7-111

Victoria Rodríguez-Roldán, J.D., Statewide Autism Coordinator

June 30, 2026

Introduction

In 2020, Maryland created the State Coordinator of Autism Strategy and the Advisory Stakeholder Group for Autism Related Needs (ASGARN). Since 2023, this office has been part of the Maryland Department of Disabilities (MDOD). In April 2025, we started a five-year Autism Strategic Plan (ASP) to better support autistic Marylanders until 2030. This report shows what we accomplished in the plan's first year (Fiscal Year 2026).

Over the past year, we have made significant strides in advancing the plan's mission. Through the dedicated efforts of the Advisory Stakeholder Group for Autism Related Needs (ASGARN), which convened five times this fiscal year, we successfully launched an autism resources webpage for the Maryland Department of Disabilities. We also prioritized extensive community outreach, including participation in Autism Acceptance Month 2026 and numerous events across the state, ensuring that the Coordinator's office remains directly engaged with the voices of autistic Marylanders and their families.

Maryland has also made many policy and legislative advancements during the year. Notable milestones include the rollout of "Eric's ID Law," with over 22,000 Marylanders already requesting the butterfly symbol for invisible disabilities, and the passage of the LEAD Act of 2026 (Ch. 658, Acts of 2026, which mandates training for law enforcement officers regarding intellectual and developmental disabilities. Furthermore, the Coordinator and ASGARN have strengthened partnerships with institutions like Towson University to foster collaborative research and improve educational support systems.

While we celebrate these accomplishments, this report also highlights critical areas for continued focus. We have identified ongoing needs regarding state-level data collection—specifically in housing, employment, and college education—and we remain deeply concerned by the current wait times for the Autism Waiver. Addressing these systemic gaps will be a primary focus as we move into the next year of the Strategic Plan.

Year One ASGARN and Coordinator Activities

Advisory Stakeholder Group for Autism Related Needs (ASGARN)

During Fiscal Year 2026, the entire ASGARN group met five times. Four were regular meetings, and one was a special session to get information about the Autism Waiver from the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE).

The group also started three smaller subcommittees that meet more often to focus on:

- **Legislative Affairs:** Working on laws and government processes.
- **Resource Development:** Finding and sharing helpful community tools and looking for ways to create new ones.

- **Data and Research:** Identifying gaps in information to help us better understand autism in Maryland.

Coordinator Activities

Autism Resource Webpage

In FY26, MDOD launched an autism resources webpage on the MDOD website. This was done with help from the ASGARN Resources subcommittee, who helped review and provide current resources. The main goal for the ASP's first year was to find helpful resources already available to the community from both the state and from non-profit and local government groups. These resources are sorted by topic and audience, based on the important subjects in the ASP. The webpage will be updated often as new information becomes available, especially as the MDOD website moves to a new system. Keeping a resource webpage is the key way to connect with the community and connect them with the support and resources Maryland offers.

- Recommendations and next steps:

We are currently building the Autism Resource Webpage while the MDOD website moves to a new content management system. Once the move is finished, we will keep improving the page and making sure the information stays up to date.

2026 Autism Acceptance Month and other community outreach

Nationally, April is recognized as "Autism Acceptance Month." While community outreach happens all year, April is usually the busiest time for sharing our work and helping others spread information about autism resources. In April 2026, the Coordinator's outreach activities included: meeting and recording a podcast with the Arc of Southern Maryland's autistic community group in Prince Frederick; joining the Maryland Autism Coalition for the official Autism Acceptance Day announcement in both parts of the General Assembly; and presenting the Governor's proclamation for Autism Acceptance Month 2026 at events like Howard County's Autism in the Park, Anne Arundel County's Autism in the Park, and the Maryland Zoo's Autism Acceptance day event. We also attended the Towson University's Autism Studies PhD Program's annual conference, which is one of the few academic programs like it in the country.

It is the Coordinator's goal to reach out to communities across Maryland and attend a variety of events throughout the year. For example, the Coordinator gave a guest lecture at Towson's graduate program, spoke at the Autism Society of Maryland's 5K in October 2025, presented the Governor's citation for the anniversary of the Resources for Independence Center for Independent Living in Cumberland, and spoke to members of the Bay Area Center for Independent Living and the Lower Shore Autism Caucus, among other groups and events.

- Recommendations and next steps

The Coordinator will continue to prioritize community outreach. Current plans include finding new ways to reach and expand this support to underserved communities, especially those in rural areas and immigrant communities.

Year One Implementation activities by area

Education

According to the last special education count published by the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) (October 1,2025):

- 24,053 K-12 students with an autism diagnosis received special education services in public or private schools. This makes up 13.99% of the disabled students receiving IEP services.
- When broken down by race: 51 were American Indian or Alaska Native, 17.92% were Asian, 10,494 were Black or African American, 26 were Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, 5,776 were Non-Hispanic White, 4,497 were Hispanic or Latino, and 1,417 were of two or more races.
- 1,305 students with autism left the special education system in the 2024-25 school year. Most of these students graduated with a diploma (48.93%), followed by those who received a certificate (20.38%). Others either moved out of Maryland but continued special education (15.42%), returned to general education (9.77%), or dropped out of school (4.35%).

The Coordinator has built a strong connection over the past year with the Towson University Autism Studies doctoral program. This includes working with their researchers on suicide prevention and intervention and speaking to their classes.

The Maryland Higher Education Commission (MHEC) has collected data on the total number of students with disabilities served at Maryland colleges, but it does not separate this data by specific disability. Because of this, we are missing information on autistic students.

- Recommendations and next steps:

We suggest trying to collect information on autism diagnoses to understand what college students need. We plan to talk with MHEC to see if this is possible.

Employment

The MSDE Division of Rehabilitation Services (DORS) reported serving a total of 4,882 people with a primary or secondary autism diagnosis during the last two full fiscal years (FY24 and FY25). Of this number:

- 1,350 individuals (ages 14-21) received pre-employment transition services. Of these, 268 were female, 1,064 were male, and 18 chose not to identify their gender.
- 3,532 individuals received adult job training services (vocational rehabilitation). Of these, 669 were female, 2,804 were male, and 59 chose not to identify their gender.

Although the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics tracks data on disability in the workplace, it does not separate the data by specific disability. This means we lack specific employment information for individuals with autism.

- Recommendations and next steps:

We are missing official information about the job experiences of autistic Marylanders. In the future, we plan to identify resources to support a community survey of the autism community regarding their unmet employment needs.

Housing

Housing was identified as a priority for Year Two of the ASP (FY27). In FY26, the Coordinator and ASGARN worked to identify data gaps for the housing experience of Maryland's autism community. We noted a general lack of public, Federal or state-specific information about the housing situations of individuals based on their autism diagnosis.

- Recommendations and next steps:

We plan to develop and conduct a statewide survey to learn more about the experience of the autism community in finding and retaining affordable, accessible housing in Maryland. We also plan to work with relevant agencies to separate the data collected on people with an autism diagnosis who get long-term services and supports. This will help us understand where they are living, such as in their own homes, with family, in group homes, or in institutions.

Transportation

During Year One of the ASP, the Motor Vehicle Administration (MVA) rolled out Eric's ID Law, which was passed in the 2025 legislative session. This law lets Maryland residents choose to add a butterfly symbol to their driver's license or MVA-issued ID card. The butterfly symbol shows that the person has an invisible intellectual or developmental disability. Anyone can ask for the butterfly symbol anytime online through the MVA website or at any MVA office or kiosk. Also, when someone renews their license or ID card online, the form will ask if they want to add the symbol. As of April 10, 2026, the MVA reported that 17,717 people had requested the butterfly symbol.

- Recommendations and next steps

In the coming years, we plan to work with the Maryland Department of Transportation to make it easier for people to get driver's education and use public transit.

Safety

Safety-related topics were a top priority in Year One of the ASP. After the 2025 legislative session, at the request of Speaker Peña-Melnyk, the Coordinator worked with the ASGARN legislative subcommittee and the Maryland Autism Coalition to create a report of recommendations. This report addresses the serious issue of wandering and elopement.

Before writing the recommendations, we held listening sessions across the state to hear the concerns of families affected by this issue. We also consulted with the Maryland State Police about the status of the Purple Alert program, which establishes a missing persons alert system for when people with intellectual and developmental disabilities go missing. In addition, the Coordinator sought input from the Montgomery County Police Department's Autism, Alzheimer's, and Dementia unit.

During the 2026 legislative session, the Maryland General Assembly passed the LEAD Act of 2026 (Ch. 658, Acts of 2026), which requires the training of law enforcement officers in the state to include intellectual and developmental disabilities, including wandering and elopement issues.

Interactions between first responders and autistic individuals have been a major focus, especially following tragic events like the death of Alex Lamotrie during an encounter with the Howard County Police. The Statewide Autism Coordinator represents MDOD and ASGARN on the task force established by Howard County Executive Calvin Ball following the Lamotrie incident. The Coordinator is also actively involved in other task forces and working closely with various groups to find ways to assist and improve the relationship between law enforcement and the community. She is also a member of the Autism Coalition.

- Recommendations and next steps:

We will continue to work with the community and stakeholders on the important issue of wandering and elopement. It is also a priority right now to coordinate with law enforcement organizations and advocacy groups to help improve training and interactions with the autism community.

Healthcare, Identification and Intervention

The Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Project, funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, checks how often children are diagnosed with autism. It does this by tracking diagnoses in specific areas across the country and measuring diagnosis rates for children who are 4 and 8 years old. The Maryland tracking area includes Cecil, Harford, Baltimore, Carroll, and Howard Counties. Based on 2022 data, 1 in 38 eight-year-old children in this area had an autism diagnosis. When broken down by race: 31.3% were Asian and Pacific Islander, 36.8% were Black, 28.6% were Hispanic, 29.5% were Multiracial, and 19.3% were White.

ADDM currently only studies diagnosis rates for 4-year-olds and 8-year-olds. The project plans to collect data on 16-year-olds to understand how often autism is diagnosed later, after early childhood, but this process is not finished yet.

The Coordinator has supported MDOD in monitoring social media and other media sources for false or misleading information about the causes of autism. The Coordinator worked with MDOD to share accurate scientific information from the Maryland Department of Health (MDH) about vaccinations and other public health issues with the disability community. During the last legislative session, MDOD also wrote letters to support better access to vaccinations for Marylanders in support of the Vax Act, (Ch. 8, Acts of 2026), which was a Governor's Bill.

- Recommendations and next steps:

The Coordinator, with assistance from ASGARN, will work with MDH and others to ensure Marylanders receive accurate, unbiased information about autism and related public health topics. We also plan to keep working with the community and MDH on other issues impacting autistic people in the state.

Family and Caregiver Supports

Developing caregiver supports is a priority for Year Two of the ASP (FY27). The Coordinator tracked several developments to support caregivers in FY26. During the

2026 Legislative Session, the Maryland General Assembly passed Ch. 873, Acts of 2026. This bill requires MDH to create a Caregiver Resource Webpage that provides and lists resources for people who care for those with disabilities and dementia.

Also in FY26, the Coordinator joined a committee for the Ambassador Respite Program, starting in 2026, which assembles representatives from various local respite program agencies across the state as well as state governments to promote the program and discuss ways to improve it and spread awareness of it. .

- Recommendations and next steps:

We look forward to working with local groups, the Department of Aging, and caregiver organizations.

During Fiscal Year 2024, the Maryland Caregiver Commission distributed a survey across the state to determine the requirements of family caregivers. The University of Maryland performed an analysis of the collected information in Fiscal Year 2025. The Maryland Department of Disabilities expects to release these findings within the subsequent Annual Progress Analysis.

Community Integration

MDOD has named the Coordinator as its representative for the Maryland Center for Developmental Disabilities Community Advisory Group and the Developmental Disabilities Administration Rate Review Advisory Committee.

Prior to FY26, the Developmental Disabilities Administration (DDA) provided services to autistic Marylanders and those with other developmental disabilities through three distinct waivers. In July 2025, following authorization from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, these separate programs were consolidated into a single unified waiver. During FY26, DDA also began the process of changing the reimbursement rates for its waiver services, including for family providers.

DDA has informed the Coordinator that their record-keeping system makes it hard to get data on how many people they serve have an autism diagnosis. This information is key to understanding the situation of people who get long-term services and supports and their needs for community integration so they can keep living in their communities.

The Autism Waiver is a Medicaid program run by MSDE. It provides services to autistic individuals up to age 21 who need more focused, individualized support, usually given in an institutional setting. The Waiver allows them to receive these services while staying in the community. The Registry is the first step of applying; after an initial review, the person is added to the Waitlist and will later be invited to apply for services.

As of February 4, 2026, there were 1,507 people in the Registry, 5,521 people on the Waitlist, and 1,679 participants currently receiving services. The wait time as of that date was 7 years and 4 months, with MSDE adding about 130 new people to the Registry each month. Due to limits on funding and staff, invitations to apply for services have been stopped since January 2024.

The Coordinator is an active member of the Autism Waiver Advisory Group.

- Recommendations and next steps:

It is imperative to be able to collect data on the state of autistic people in the DDA Waiver system and we intend to continue working with MDH to help find ways that information can be extracted. Additionally, we recommend the General Assembly provide the necessary funding to the Autism Waiver to be able to reduce the current wait for receiving services.

Adult Guardianship and Alternatives

Maryland currently offers assisted decision-making as a choice instead of guardianship. A priority of the Autism Strategic Plan is to make sure guardianship is only used for autistic people as a last resort when absolutely necessary. The Department of Disabilities is working with various groups to make sure families have more access to information about the assisted decision-making system to help them find alternatives to guardianship.

- Recommendations and next steps:

Plans for future fiscal years include partnering with stakeholders to promote the importance of the Supported Decision Making Act model established in Maryland. Resource creation in partnership with organizations that promote the supported decision-making model's use helps ensure its greater use and the goal that guardianship should be a last resort.

Cultural Competence and Underserved Communities

A key priority for the Coordinator has been reaching out to communities that are underserved. Over the last year, we focused heavily on Spanish-speaking communities and the rural areas of the state. Because of this focus, when we held listening sessions about wandering and elopement, several were aimed at Western Maryland and the Eastern Shore. We also held one session in Spanish and had multiple Spanish-language meetings with support groups for Hispanic families. The Coordinator also had

the chance to meet with and hear the needs of autistic groups in Southern Maryland, specifically in the Prince Frederick area.

- Recommendations and next steps:

We will keep working with groups like Resources for Independence, the Bay Area Center for Independent Living, the Lower Shore Autism Coalition, and the Arc of Southern Maryland. Our main goals are to focus on the needs of the LGBTQ community, including working with the LGBTQ Commission, and addressing the needs of people in rural areas and immigrant communities.

Appendixes

- A. Statutes for ASGARN and Coordinator: [Statewide Autism Coordinator Statute](#)
- B. Link to Autism State Plan: [Autism State Plan](#)
- C. Link to Autism Resource Webpage: [Autism Resources Webpage MDOD](#)