Task Force on Disability Inclusion, Safety, & Crisis Response Report

Submitted to County Executive Ball

Convened Under Executive Order 2026-08

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Letter from Co-Chairs

October 29, 2026

Dear County Executive Ball:

Attached is the report of the Howard County Disability Inclusion, Safety, and Crisis Response Task Force, established through Executive Order 2026-08 following the death of Alex LaMorie, an autistic individual experiencing a mental health crisis in Howard County on March 1, 2026. The Task Force was charged with examining the County's response to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) during crises and identifying opportunities to improve safety, communication, and crisis response for individuals and their families.

Over the course of four months, Task Force members—including professionals with clinical and practical expertise, government and nonprofit representatives, individuals with disabilities, family members, and community advocates—worked to identify challenges and develop practical recommendations. Members brought a range of experiences and perspectives to this important work.

The Task Force's recommendations were approved by a majority of the members who voted, although the outcome reflects differing perspectives among members. We recognize that significant work remains to translate these recommendations into meaningful, lasting change. The report addresses four focus areas established by the Executive Order, with recommendations intended to strengthen coordination, training, accountability, and collaboration among County agencies, service providers, and the community.

As Co-Chairs, we want to emphasize two overarching priorities reflected in the Task Force recommendations that are essential to moving this work forward:

1. **Prioritize the recommendations of this Task Force.** We recommend that the County prioritize the recommendations of the Task Force through a new Executive Order or other action that creates a Steering Committee comprised of a subgroup of Task Force members. This Committee will ensure the implementation of the recommendations by the County, reporting at the end of each calendar year to the County Executive.
2. **Include people with disabilities in every stage of the process.** Individuals with disabilities and their families must have meaningful opportunities to participate in

planning, decision-making, and implementation related to crisis response and the recommendations outlined in this report. Their lived experiences and perspectives are essential to developing effective, inclusive approaches that address the needs of the community.

We strongly encourage the County to dedicate the resources necessary to advance these priorities and develop clear, actionable steps for implementing the recommendations. While the report represents an important step, continued collaboration, advocacy, and sustained commitment will be necessary to address systemic barriers and help prevent similar tragedies in the future.

We appreciate your leadership in establishing the Task Force and thank all members for their time, expertise, and dedication. We are especially grateful to the individuals with disabilities and family members who shared their personal experiences and helped inform this work.

Thank you for the opportunity to serve as Co-Chairs. We hope this report provides a starting point for continued progress toward a safer, more responsive, and more inclusive Howard County.

Sincerely,



Acting Col. Terrence Benn
Howard County Police Department



Melissa Rosenberg
Executive Director
Autism Society of Maryland

Overview & Purpose

On May 27, 2026, County Executive Ball signed Executive Order 2026-08 to establish the Task Force on Disability Inclusion, Safety, and Crisis Response. Howard County has long come together to support the needs and concerns of people with disabilities and neurodivergent individuals. The County also places great value on ensuring the safety, dignity, and health of these individuals through greater awareness and supportive interaction. At this time, it was important to revisit policies and procedures that first responders follow to ensure they meet these principles.

The County Executive appointed members from diverse backgrounds, including representation from local and State government, nonprofit organizations, local and State councils, individuals with lived experience, and clinicians. In total, 53 members served on the Task Force. Their evaluation of crisis response policies and practices centered on four focus areas:

1. **Training for County Employees**, specifically frontline employees, including but not limited to law enforcement, EMS, social workers, and community health workers, who interact with people with disabilities and neurodivergent individuals;
2. **Education, Outreach, and Partnerships**, specifically, the Task Force shall identify strategies to improve coordination, alignment, and communication among all organizations and partners that support people with disabilities and neurodivergent individuals;
3. **On-Scene Response Protocols**, specifically, the Task Force shall review relevant Federal, State, and Local laws, regulations, and policies that govern protocols when responding to a behavioral health crisis involving a member of the disability or neurodivergent community; and
4. **Emergency Response and Prevention Protocols**, specifically, the Task Force shall review the County's current 911 communication protocols as it relates to mental health crisis response for people with disabilities and neurodivergent individuals, as well as use of 988 and specialized mobile crisis response teams in Howard County and in other jurisdictions.

Task Force Composition

The Task Force included representatives from disability and neurodivergent communities, advocacy and service organizations, law enforcement, fire and rescue, public health and behavioral health, schools, and other government and community partners.

Melissa Rosenberg (Executive Director, Autism Society of Maryland) and Terrence Benn (Acting Colonel, Howard County Police Department) served as co-chairs. Tiffany Erbelding, Principal of Ignited Strategies served as the facilitator of all work session meetings.

A listing of the membership is included below.

Organization / Position	Appointee Name
African American Community Roundtable of Howard County	Vernon Curry
Al's Love Café	Alarice Vidale de Palacios
Arc of Howard County	Katie Collins Ihrke
Arc of Maryland	Ande Kolp
Accessible Resources for Independence	Susan Larsen
Association of Community Services	Lois Mikkila
Athelas	Anthony Gibbs
Autism Society of Maryland (Co-Chair)	Melissa Rosenberg
Behavioral Health System Baltimore	Adrienne Breidenstine
Community Action Council of Howard County	Tracy Broccolino
County Executive-appointed (Co-Chair)	Terrence Benn
Department of Community Resources and Services	Jackie Scott
Department of Fire and Rescue Services	Asst. Chief Robert Utz
Department of Recreation and Parks	Susan Potts
Department of Social Services	Kyle Popkey
Developmental Disabilities Council	Rachel London
Disability and neurodivergent community representative	Jill Harrington
Disability and neurodivergent community representative	Kirsten Poston
Disability and neurodivergent community representative	Jeannie-Marie Leoutsakos
Disability and neurodivergent community representative	Rae Haight
Disability and neurodivergent community representative	Darian Senn-Carter
Disability and neurodivergent community representative	Matthew Plantz
Disability and neurodivergent community representative	Denise Hardy
Disability and neurodivergent community representative	Susan Hirsch
Disability and neurodivergent community representative	Kendra Banks
Disability Rights Maryland	Lucia Caltagirone
Ethan Saylor Alliance	Jennifer Eastman
Grassroots Crisis Intervention	Mariana Izraelson

Organization / Position	Appointee Name
HC SECAC	Melanie Lamar
Horizon Foundation	Nikki Highsmith Vernick
Howard County Commission on Disabilities	Monica Banks
Howard County Police Accountability Board	Nellie Hutt
Howard County Public School System	Melissa Brunson
Humanim	Jesse Guercio
Hussman Institute for Autism	Beth Benevides
Johns Hopkins Howard County Medical Center	Ryan Brown
L.O.V.E. Is the Answer	A.J. Ali
Local Behavioral Health Authority	Roe Bonaccorsy
Maryland Department of Disabilities	Victoria Rodriguez Roldan
Maryland Department of Health, Behavioral Health Administration	Lucy Bill Moore
NAACP	Willie Flowers
NAMI Howard County	Denise Giuliano
NAMI Maryland	Stephanie Slowly Little
Neurodiversity-affirming clinician	Vincent Culotta
Neurodiversity-affirming clinician	Rachel Kraus
On Our Own	Kris Locus
Office of Consumer Protection	Tracy Rezvani
Office of Human Rights and Equity	Liv Alanis Myers
Pathfinders for Autism	Shelly McLaughlin
People On the Go	Mat Rice
Police Department	John Lloyd
Sheppard Pratt	Jeff Grossi
Sheriff's Office	Troy Rodgers

Task Force Process

The Task Force convened seven times between July 20 and October 27. Howard County government created a website to post meeting notifications and information about the Task Force. Links to all Task Force meeting agendas, materials, minutes, and reports can be found here: https://www.howardcountymd.gov/boards-commissions/task-force-disability-inclusion-safety-and-crisis-response. In addition, Appendix A to this report contains a summary of resources made available to Task Force members.

Overall, conversation focused on reviewing current training practices for first responders, exploring current crisis practices, learning from other communities about crisis response protocols, and hearing from a national expert on justice and the disability community. The Task Force reviewed crisis response practices affecting people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, autism, other disabilities, and co-occurring mental or behavioral health needs. Its discussions highlighted the importance of individualized de-escalation, accessible communication, collaboration between 911 and 988, alternatives to police-only response, better information about dispatch outcomes, and sustained involvement of people with disabilities. The Task Force also reviewed feedback from two community input sessions held on July 20 and August 20.

Task Force members formed a subgroup to draft a public survey to capture additional community input. Members tasked the proposed steering committee to field the survey, engage community on the Task Force recommendations, and provide updates on the implementation process.

Meeting dates and principal activities for each work session are listed below:

Date	Principal activities
July 30, 2026	Work Session #1 (Hybrid) • Introductions. • Discussion of Task Force suggestions on how best to engage community. • Presentation from the Howard County Police Department on current training protocols. • Presentation from the Local Behavioral Health Authority on the 988/911 collaborative. • Discussion of current crisis response protocols.
August 24, 2026	Work Session #2 (Hybrid) • Updates from the August 20 community session. • Review of Howard County Police Department protocols and best practices related to crisis response. • Presentation from the Montgomery County Autism/IDD/Alzheimer's/Dementia Unit. • Presentation from Anne Arundel County Crisis Response System • Creation of the community survey subgroup. • Discussion of developing opportunities to improve crisis response.
September 28, 2026	Work Session #3 (Hybrid) • Presentation from Leigh Anne McKingsley, Senior Director of Disability and Justice Initiatives, The Arc of the US. • Review of themes from the July 29 and August 20 community sessions. • Discussion of the community survey drafted by the subgroup. • Discussion of the draft Task Force recommendations – with a focus on prioritizing and identifying barriers to implementation.
October 6, 2026	Work Session #4 (Hybrid) • Discussion of the final draft of task force recommendations – with a focus on refining the language and overall framework.
October 15, 2026	Discussion (Virtual) • Proposed initially as a voting session; however, the meeting did not move forward with a final vote. • Task Force members selected to hold one additional meeting to allow for final a discussion of recommendations, to be followed by a voting session.
October 22, 2026	Discussion (Virtual) • Final task force discussion of draft recommendations.
October 27, 2026	Voting Session* (Virtual) • Final recommendations approved.

*Voting Session: Each member named in Executive Order 2026-08 was afforded a vote on the proposed recommendations. With 33 members present for the vote, the Task Force voted to approve the recommendations. The vote presented as 24 members in favor, two opposed, and seven abstaining.

Recommendations of the Task Force

Summary

Over the past several months, the Task Force on Disability Inclusion, Safety, and Crisis Response, established by County Executive Dr. Calvin Ball under Executive Order 2026-08, has worked collaboratively to examine the concerns of the community after the fatal police shooting of Alex LaMorie, a person with autism experiencing a mental health crisis on March 1, 2026, in Howard County. The charge of this Task Force was to identify practical opportunities to improve crisis response, strengthen coordination among County agencies, and ensure the inclusion of people with disabilities and neurodivergent people.

The Task Force's recommendations align with the four focus areas of Executive Order 2026-08:

- **Training for County Employees**, specifically frontline employees, including but not limited to law enforcement, EMS, social workers, and community health workers, who interact with people with disabilities and neurodivergent people.
- **Education, Outreach, and Partnerships**, specifically, the Task Force shall identify strategies to improve coordination, alignment, and communication among all organizations and partners that support people with disabilities and neurodivergent people.
- **On-Scene Response Protocols**, specifically, the Task Force shall review relevant Federal, State, and Local laws, regulations, and policies that govern protocols when responding to a behavioral health crisis involving a member of the disability or neurodivergent community.
- **Emergency Response and Prevention Protocols**, specifically, the Task Force shall review the County's current 911 communication protocols as it relates to mental health crisis response for people with disabilities and neurodivergent people, as well as use of 988 and specialized mobile crisis response teams in Howard County and in other jurisdictions.

Below are the recommendations of this Task Force to the Howard County Executive.

High-level Recommendations and Priorities

1. **Ensure Meaningful Disability Inclusion**
    i. Include people with disabilities, neurodivergent people and disability community representatives in all stages of planning, decision-making and implementation on crisis response.

2. **Improve Crisis Response and Require the Use of Safer Response Options**
    i. Embed the Mobile Crisis Team (MCT) into dispatch 24/7, ensuring increased capacity during overnight hours (11pm - 6am) to more holistically respond to high-risk cases.
    ii. Develop alternative response models that require mental health professionals over police.
    iii. Require use of less-lethal tools, training and clear use-of-force policies.

3. **Require Comprehensive Training**
    i. Mandate ongoing collaborative disability and behavioral health training for Police, Fire/EMS, MCT and other relevant County personnel.
    ii. Improve trainings to better address communication practices and deescalation.

4. **Ensure Leadership and Accountability**
    i. Establish transparent data collection and public reporting.
    ii. Continue the work of the Task Force with a subgroup to monitor implementation of the recommendations and to hold the County accountable.

Detailed Recommendations

The following recommendations represent areas where the Task Force encourages the County to allot resources and develop practical action steps to implement its recommendations.

PRIMARY (spanning all four focus areas)

1. Request that the incoming County Executive prioritize the recommendations of this Task Force through a new Executive Order or other action to:
    i. Create a Steering Committee as a subgroup of the Task Force to ensure the implementation of its recommendations and hold the County accountable for that implementation.

       The Committee shall be established no more than six months after the swearing in of the next County Executive.

       The Committee shall provide a progress report to the County Executive by December 31 of each year.

    ii. The Committee shall oversee engagement from the community on the plan by:

        - Finalizing a survey drafted by the Task Force that is translated into additional languages and in plain language to ensure accessibility.
        - Ensure the survey is distributed to the community by the appropriate entity that will also share the recommendations of the Task Force, report survey results, and capture suggestions from the community as the County executes the Task Force's recommendations.
2. Include people with disabilities and neurodivergent people in all stages of planning, decision-making and implementation on crisis response and the recommendations of this Task Force.

FOCUS AREA: TRAINING FOR COUNTY EMPLOYEES

1. Mandate ongoing, collaborative disability, behavioral health and crisis-response training for law enforcement, EMS, social workers, community health workers, emergency communications and other relevant County personnel (healthcare, housing, food, etc.) that involves people with disabilities and neurodivergent people.

2. Complete a more in-depth review of current training and recommendations for changes/additions/improvement to that training that involves people with disabilities and neurodivergent people.

3. Improve training for dispatchers/emergency communications/ 911 and 988 to address:
    i. De-escalation.
    ii. Interaction with caregivers and family members, including those who reach out to check on an adult who has called for assistance themselves.
    iii. Understanding communication differences for callers with disabilities and neurodivergent people who may need different context/information/guidance, and may interpret assessment questions differently than intended.

FOCUS AREA: EDUCATION, OUTREACH, AND PARTNERSHIPS

1. Establish transparent data collection and public reporting to better screen and track engagements between police, emergency communications, people with disabilities and neurodivergent people including but not limited to:

    i. Creating a dashboard to regularly report on 911/988 calls and text data to include information such as total number of mental health calls to 911, total calls transferred to Grassroots Crisis Center; number of police co-responses with MCT; number of police-only dispatch calls to mental health calls; police response outcomes; and reach of the 911 flagging program.

    ii. Delivering an annual report on the collected data. Include qualitative data capture (e.g., following up with individuals who have been involved in a police response).

2. Increase training and awareness around internet safety and cybercrime for all county residents, ensuring that outreach and training are inclusively marketed.

3. Increase funding for community-based and behavioral health programs for people with disabilities and neurodivergent people.

FOCUS AREA: ON SCENE RESPONSE PROTOCOLS

1. Develop alternative response models that require mental health professionals over police.

2. Mandate appropriate intermediate-range, less-lethal tools, training, and clear policies designed to support de-escalation, preservation of life, and the safety of everyone concerned.

3. Evaluate the current capacity of the CIT Section within Howard County Police Department to assess what staffing is required to meet current needs and projected future needs.

FOCUS AREA: EMERGENCY RESPONSE AND PREVENTION PROTOCOLS

1. Embed the Mobile Crisis Team (MCT) into dispatch 24/7, ensuring increased capacity during overnight hours (11pm-6am) to more holistically respond to high-risk cases.

2. Complete a comprehensive, independent review of the current practices and operations of mobile crisis response, assessing gaps and effectiveness.

3. Ensure the Howard County Health Department 911/988 Collaborative works with people with disabilities and neurodivergent people to evaluate and address:
    i. How to improve call transfer and coordination between 911 and 988
    ii. Updates to State protocol (and the related Howard County Police Department SOP COMM-08 Policy) to:
        - Ensure questions and diversion language are accessible to all callers (and are worded such that they are interpreted by all callers as intended), particularly people with disabilities and neurodivergent people.
        - Reconsider silence/no response as an automatic police dispatch.
        - Clarify how the protocol applies to bystanders and caregivers.

4. Update the after-action review process, aka Sentinel Review, to include an independent review of incidents and policies to make recommendations.

Appendix A. List of Additional Resources Shared with Task Force Members

I. HCPD General Orders and SOPs related to Mental Health and IDD

I. Behavioral Health Crisis Response Triage Matrix

II. Law Enforcement Response to Persons with IDDs (RAND)

III. Vera Institute Literature Review of Crisis Response Services

IV. Autism and Safe Police Interactions

V. Autistic Communication Suggestions

VI. COMAR Mobile Crisis Team Regulations

VII. Fire/EMS tools/trainings nationwide:

a. https://ibcces.org/blog/2024/04/12/alexandria-fire-dept/
b. https://www.allhandsfiretraining.com/course-catalog/specialized-training/autism-awareness
c. https://traubassoc.com/first-responder-disability-training/
d. https://jemstraining.com/courses/autism-awareness-for-first-responders/
e. https://iddsafe.com/
f. https://nps-aid.org/blue-envelope-program/
g. https://autismsociety.org/first-responder/