



January 29rd, 2025

House Health, Human Services and Elderly Affairs Committee

Subject: Testimony to HB 634

Dear Honorable Chair and Committee Members,

As someone who has worked directly with students with disabilities—both as a teacher and as a community advocate—I have seen firsthand how systems, when underfunded or outdated, fail to meet the needs of individuals on the autism spectrum and their families. This bill represents a necessary step forward in ensuring that New Hampshire has a **coordinated and responsive approach** to addressing the needs of individuals with autism.

The Importance of the New Hampshire Council on Autism Spectrum Disorders

Since its inception, the **New Hampshire Council on Autism Spectrum Disorders (NHCASD)** has played a critical role in shaping policy and coordinating services for individuals on the spectrum. However, in the years since the council was first established, **both the diagnostic criteria and the needs of the community have evolved.**

- The **Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)** has undergone significant revisions since the council was first formed. The transition from DSM-IV to DSM-5 has **changed the criteria for autism spectrum disorder (ASD)**—eliminating diagnoses such as Asperger’s syndrome and incorporating a broader spectrum of individuals under the ASD umbrella.
- Those who were children when the council was first created **are now adults**, and their needs have changed. As New Hampshire works to ensure comprehensive, lifelong supports, the council must reflect these **shifting realities.**
- The world we live in has changed. Advances in technology, education, employment, and social services mean that individuals on the autism spectrum **have new opportunities and new challenges** that must be addressed through updated policies and services.

HB 634 is a **necessary update** to the council’s structure, ensuring that it remains relevant, effective, and responsive to the evolving needs of the autism community.

Why Expanding Membership Matters

One of the most significant changes in this bill is the **expansion of council membership**—ensuring that more individuals with lived experience, including **self-advocates and family members**, have a seat at the table.

For too long, policies and services have been shaped primarily by professionals—medical experts, educators, and agency leaders. While their expertise is valuable, **it is equally critical to include the voices of those who experience autism in a nonprofessional way.**

- **Self-advocates** can speak directly to the challenges of navigating education, employment, healthcare, and independent living.

- **Family members** bring firsthand knowledge of the gaps in services and the barriers to accessing appropriate supports.
- **A diverse council—one that includes individuals across the spectrum and at different life stages—ensures that no one is left behind.**

This expansion is not just about representation—it is about making **better, more informed policy decisions**. The people most affected by these systems should be the ones helping to shape them.

Bridging the Gaps in Services

As a former special education teacher, I have seen the **disconnect** between policies and real-life experiences.

- I have worked with students with **intellectual and developmental disabilities**, whose families struggled to access timely evaluations and appropriate educational placements.
- I have worked with students with **emotional and behavioral challenges**, who needed mental health supports that were inconsistent or unavailable due to provider shortages.
- I have worked with **families who felt lost in a maze of disconnected services**, unsure of where to turn next.

A well-structured, inclusive NHCASD can provide **critical guidance** in bridging these gaps, ensuring that New Hampshire moves toward a system where **services are comprehensive, accessible, and person-centered**.

HB 634 is About Inclusion, Access, and Accountability

New Hampshire has the opportunity to be a leader in ensuring that individuals on the autism spectrum are not just recipients of services but **active participants in shaping those services**. HB 634 does not simply restructure a council—it strengthens **the voice of autistic individuals, families, and professionals** in shaping the future of policy and service delivery in our state.

I urge you to **support HB 634** to ensure that New Hampshire is not just meeting basic requirements but is **leading with intention and commitment** to the full inclusion of people on the autism spectrum.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,



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References

