MARCH 9, 2024

Statement from the Virginia Autism Project Board of Directors about the passage of Senator Boysko's SB357 and Delegate Watts' HB267 relating to protecting people with ID/DD/ASD and mental illness from felony charges when in a crisis.

For the last five (5) years, the Virginia Autism Project (VAP) has worked with other disability and criminal justice advocates to change the laws and protect individuals with ID/DD/ASD from being charged with a felony when they are in a crisis and the police are called to assist. These populations are disproportionately and negatively affected by a felony charge and conviction by losing life-saving social services as a result.

Today, thanks to Senator Boysko and Delegate Watts, the Virginia Legislature passed bills to address this issue, and advocates are now calling on Governor Youngkin to allow the bill to pass into law.

"This legislation is crucial to ensuring that individuals with autism, intellectual disabilities, or developmental disabilities are not unfairly criminalized during moments of crisis while at the same time protecting an officer's right to arrest," said Teresa Champion, Board Member at Virginia Autism Project. "We must prioritize the well-being and safety of these individuals by preventing unnecessary involvement in the criminal justice system."

VAP is calling on all disability advocates to turn their attention to the Governor and ask that he allow this critical legislation to pass into law. It has taken multiple years and many compromises to gain passage of this narrowly drawn bill. Many in the law enforcement and criminal justice system understand that individuals with ID/DD/ASD do not belong in jails or mental health hospitals. "Our jails and mental health hospitals are operating beyond capacity and a good first step to protecting individuals who do not belong in these systems is not to process them through them in the first place. We ask that the Governor protect our most vulnerable populations by seeing the legislation to its enactment," said Champion.

Virginia Autism Project, Board of Directors

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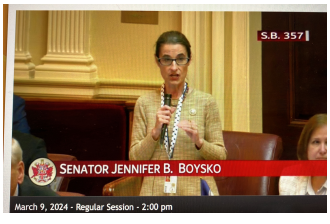

Senator Boysko and Delegate Watts speaking into microphones on the floor of their respective chambers.

