

FLORIDA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

BILL ANALYSIS

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BILL #: [HB 1405](#)

TITLE: Statewide Project for Missing Persons with Special Needs

SPONSOR(S): Duggan

COMPANION BILL: [SB 1570](#) (Gaetz)

LINKED BILLS: None

RELATED BILLS: None

Committee References

[Government Operations](#)

18 Y, 0 N

[Budget](#)

[State Affairs](#)

SUMMARY

Effect of the Bill:

The bill reestablishes the Missing Persons with Special Needs Statewide Project and implements the project through designated centers for autism and related disabilities (CARD). The bill requires each participating CARD to provide personal search-and-rescue devices to county sheriffs' offices, requires sheriffs' offices to distribute the devices to project participants in coordination with the applicable center, and requires the centers to fund monitoring costs for the devices. The bill also provides \$1 million in nonrecurring General Revenue funding for the 2026-2027 fiscal year to support the purchase of these devices.

Fiscal or Economic Impact:

The bill provides a nonrecurring appropriation of \$1,000,000 to be allocated in \$250,000 increments to each Center for Autism and Related Disabilities at the University of Florida, Florida Atlantic University, the University of South Florida, and Florida State University.

[JUMP TO](#)

[SUMMARY](#)

[ANALYSIS](#)

[RELEVANT INFORMATION](#)

[BILL HISTORY](#)

ANALYSIS

EFFECT OF THE BILL:

The bill revives and expands a law that expired in 2019 that established the Missing Persons with Special Needs Statewide Project, known as [Project Leo](#). Project Leo provided personal search-and-rescue devices to persons with special needs to aid in locating those persons in cases of elopement. (Section [1](#))

The reestablished Project Leo functions exactly like its predecessor. Selected [centers for autism and related disabilities](#) (CARDs) are responsible for administering the project within their respective service areas with each participating CARD developing criteria for selecting individuals for participation in the project. The criteria must account for an individual's risk of elopement, be implemented on a first-come, first-served basis to the extent funding is available, and ensure that participation is voluntary and provided at no cost to the participant. Each participating CARD is required to provide personal search-and-rescue devices to the sheriff's offices of participating counties. Sheriff's offices must distribute the devices to project participants in coordination with the respective CARD. The participating CARD is also required to fund any costs associated with monitoring the devices. (Section [1](#))

Additionally, the bill appropriates \$1 million in nonrecurring General Revenue funds for the 2026-2027 fiscal year, allocating \$250,000 each to the University of Florida, Florida Atlantic University, University of South Florida, and Florida State University centers, to be used solely for the purchase of personal search-and-rescue devices. (Section [2](#))

The effective date of the bill is July 1, 2026. (Section [3](#))

STORAGE NAME: h1405a.GOS

DATE: 2/11/2026

FISCAL OR ECONOMIC IMPACT:**STATE GOVERNMENT:**

The bill provides a nonrecurring appropriation of \$1,000,000 to be allocated in \$250,000 increments to each Center for Autism and Related Disabilities at the University of Florida, Florida Atlantic University, the University of South Florida, and Florida State University.

RELEVANT INFORMATION**SUBJECT OVERVIEW:****Autism and Wandering**

Wandering, also referred to as elopement, is a behavior in which an individual leaves the supervision of a caregiver or a safe environment without notice, placing the individual at risk of serious harm. This may include leaving a classroom, home, or supervised community setting and is particularly prevalent among individuals with autism. While brief wandering behavior is common in early childhood, research indicates that elopement may persist or re-emerge among individuals with autism due to communication challenges, sensory sensitivities, anxiety, or attempts to access preferred environments or avoid distressing stimuli.¹

Studies have found that nearly half of children with autism are at risk for wandering, and many individuals who elope are unable to reliably communicate identifying information. Wandering incidents pose significant safety risks, including drowning and traffic-related injuries, which are among the leading causes of wandering-related fatalities. These risks increase with the severity of autism and underscore the need for preventive strategies and timely response mechanisms to locate individuals who elope from safe settings.²

A number of wearable personal tracking devices are available that help locate individuals at risk of wandering or elopement. These devices are typically worn on the wrist or ankle and use radio frequency signals or GPS to locate a missing person. These technologies are used by caregivers and, in some cases, by law enforcement or search-and-rescue programs to locate individuals who have left a safe location.³

Center for Autism and Related Disabilities

Each Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD)⁴ is one of seven regional centers that provide nonresidential resource and training services statewide for persons of all ages who have autism, a pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified, an autistic-like disability, have a dual sensory impairment, or have a sensory impairment with other handicapping conditions.⁵ Each CARD operates independently within their respective region and coordinates services between the state, local agencies, and school districts without duplicating services.

The main functions of each CARD are to:⁶

- Provide information about an individual's disability.
- Refer families to federal, state, or local services.
- Locate support groups.
- Support family planning.
- Provide training sessions on how to work effectively with individuals with autism spectrum disorders and related disabilities.

¹ National Autism Association, [About Autism and Wandering](#) (last visited February 6, 2026).

² *Id.*

³ Autism Speaks, [Wandering Prevention](#) (last visited February 6, 2026).

⁴ Center for Autism and Related Disabilities, [About Us](#) (last visited February 6, 2026).

⁵ [S. 1004.55\(1\), F.S.](#)

⁶ Center for Autism and Related Disabilities, [About Us](#) (last visited February 6, 2026).

- Provide consultation to caregivers and professionals related to working with individuals with autism spectrum disorders and related disabilities.



The centers are located at Florida Atlantic University, Florida State University, the University of Central Florida, the University of Florida at Gainesville, the University of Florida at Jacksonville, the University of Miami, and the University of South Florida.⁷

Project Leo

In 2016, the Legislature created three “Project Leo” pilot projects, which provided personal devices to aid in search-and-rescue efforts for persons with special needs in cases of elopement. The first pilot project was developed by the CARD at the University of Florida in Gainesville and served Alachua, Baker, Columbia, Hamilton, and Suwannee Counties. The second pilot project was developed by the CARD at Florida Atlantic University and served Palm Beach County. The third pilot project was developed by the CARD at the University of South Florida and served Hillsborough County.⁸

Participants for each pilot were selected based on criteria developed by the respective CARD, including consideration of the individual’s risk of elopement. Participation was voluntary and free. The centers provided personal devices to county sheriff’s offices for distribution, and the centers were responsible for funding any monitoring costs. Each center was also required to submit preliminary and final reports describing implementation, participant information, elopement outcomes, and recommendations for the future. Each CARD was provided \$100,000 from the General Revenue Fund⁹ for the purchase of personal devices to aid search-and-rescue efforts. Funding for the general operations of the pilot projects was provided by the centers through their existing resources, and the statutory authority for the pilot projects included a scheduled expiration date of June 30, 2018.¹⁰

⁷ Center for Autism and Related Disabilities, [CARD Sites](#) (last visited February 6, 2026).

⁸ Ch. 2016-186, L.O.F.

⁹ The General Revenue Fund is the state’s primary operating fund and consists of all moneys not required by law to be deposited into a trust fund or otherwise segregated for a specific purpose. Funds deposited into the General Revenue Fund are available for legislative appropriation to support ordinary operations of state government and statewide programs. [S. 215.32\(2\)\(a\), F.S.](#)

¹⁰ Ch. 2016-186, L.O.F.

In 2018, the Legislature expanded Project Leo into a statewide project available through all centers. Any CARD that opted to join the project could participate in providing personal devices for search-and-rescue efforts. The selection criteria remained focused on an individual's risk of elopement and were to be developed by each participating center based on the needs of its service area. The device distribution mechanics were also amended to provide devices to county sheriffs' offices for distribution in conjunction with the centers and to establish that centers would continue to fund monitoring costs. The expanded statewide project continued to operate within available funding and each center's existing resources; however, the statute expired, through operation of a sunset provision, on June 30, 2019.¹¹

BILL HISTORY

COMMITTEE REFERENCE	ACTION	DATE	STAFF DIRECTOR/ POLICY CHIEF	ANALYSIS PREPARED BY
Government Operations	18 Y, 0 N	2/11/2026	Toliver	Lines
Subcommittee				
Budget Committee				
State Affairs Committee				

¹¹ Ch. 2018-54, L.O.F.