

FLORIDA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES FINAL 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

FINAL HOUSE FLOOR ACTION: 109 Y's 0 N's

GOVERNOR'S ACTION: Pending

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 CARD, and requires the CARD to fund monitoring costs for the devices.

Fiscal or Economic Impact:

For the 2026-2027 Fiscal Year, the bill provides a nonrecurring appropriation of \$1 million to be allocated in \$250,000 increments to each CARD at the University of Florida, Florida Atlantic University, the University of South Florida, and Florida State University.

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EFFECT OF THE BILL:

The bill revives and expands a statewide program that expired in 2019— 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) administer the project within their service areas with each participating CARD developing criteria for selecting individuals for participation. 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. Those devices are then distributed by the sheriff's offices to project participants in coordination with their 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 CARDS located at the University of Florida, Florida Atlantic University, University of South Florida, and Florida State University, to be used solely for the purchase of personal search-and-rescue devices. (Section [2](#))

Subject to the Governor's veto powers, the effective date of the bill is July 1, 2026. (Section [3](#))

FISCAL OR ECONOMIC IMPACT:

STATE GOVERNMENT:

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

STORAGE NAME: h1405z.GOS

DATE: 3/26/2026

RELEVANT INFORMATION

SUBJECT OVERVIEW:

Elopement

Elopement, also referred to as wandering, 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 elopement 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 elopement, and many individuals who elope are unable to reliably communicate identifying information. Elopement incidents pose significant safety risks, including drowning and traffic-related injuries, which are among the leading causes of elopement-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, a dual sensory impairment, or a sensory impairment with other handicapping conditions.⁵ Each CARD operates independently within its 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.
- Provide consultation to caregivers and professionals related to working with individuals with autism spectrum disorders and related disabilities.

¹ National Autism Association, [About Autism and Wandering](#) (last visited February 13, 2026).

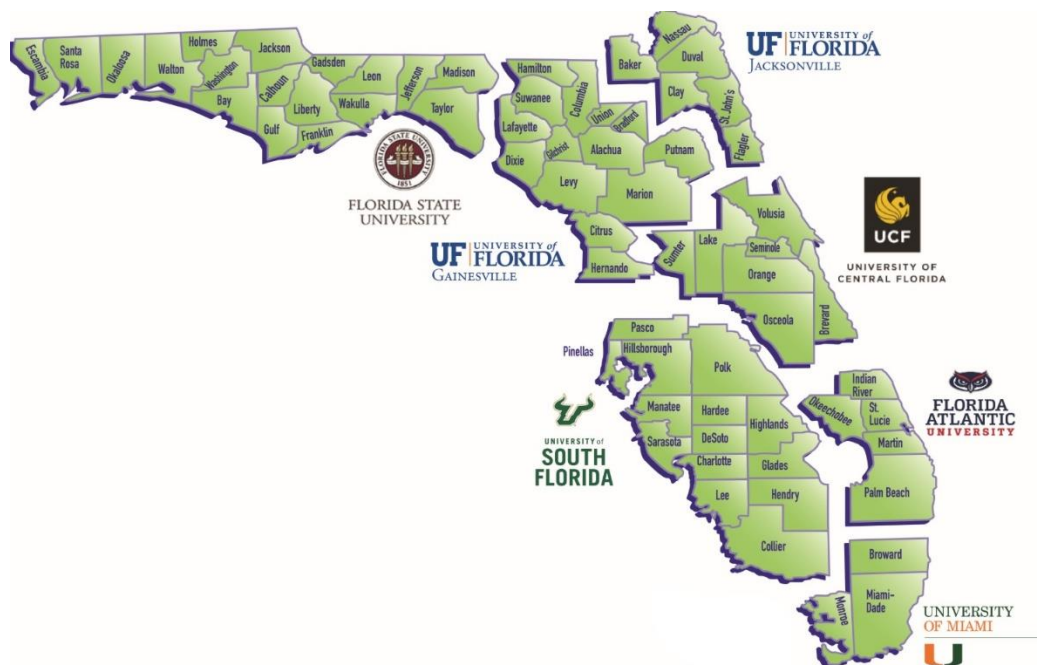
² *Id.*

³ Autism Speaks, [Wandering Prevention](#) (last visited February 13, 2026).

⁴ Center for Autism and Related Disabilities, [About Us](#) (last visited February 13, 2026).

⁵ [S. 1004.55\(1\), F.S.](#)

⁶ Center for Autism and Related Disabilities, [About Us](#) (last visited February 13, 2026).



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 project was named after Leo Walker, a boy with autism spectrum disorder who wandered from his home in 2014 and drowned.⁸ 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.⁹

Participants for each pilot project 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 sheriffs’ 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 Fund¹⁰ 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, 2018.¹¹

⁷ Center for Autism and Related Disabilities, [CARD Sites](#) (last visited February 13, 2026).

⁸ UFHealth, [In Memory of 9-year-old Leo, Free Tracking Devices Available to People with Autism Spectrum Disorder](#) (last visited February 19, 2026).

⁹ [Ch. 2016-186, L.O.F.](#)

¹⁰ 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.](#)

¹¹ [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, 2019.¹²

¹² [Ch. 2018-54, L.O.F.](#)