

The Florida Senate
BILL ANALYSIS AND FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT

(This document is based on the provisions contained in the legislation as of the latest date listed below.)

Prepared By: The Professional Staff of the Appropriations Committee on Higher Education

BILL: SB 1570

INTRODUCER: Senators Gaetz and Berman

SUBJECT: Statewide Project for Missing Persons with Special Needs

DATE: February 25, 2026

REVISED: _____

	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1.	Jahnke	Bouck	HE	Favorable
2.	Gray	Elwell	AHE	Favorable
3.			FP	

I. Summary:

SB 1570 reestablishes the Missing Persons with Special Needs Statewide Project and implements the project through designated centers for autism and related disabilities. The bill specifies that centers that join the project have the responsibility for administering the project within their service areas, including establishing participant eligibility criteria based on elopement risk and ensuring participation is voluntary and provided at no cost.

The bill requires each participating Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD or center) 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 provides \$1 million in nonrecurring General Revenue funds. **See Section V., Fiscal Impact Statement.**

The bill takes effect July 1, 2026.

II. Present Situation:

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.

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.¹

A number of wearable personal tracking devices are available that help locate individuals at risk of wandering or elopement by using electronic location technology. 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.²

Center for Autism and Related Disabilities

Each Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD)³ is one of seven regional centers that provide nonresidential resource and training services statewide for persons of all ages and of all levels of intellectual functioning 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.⁴ Each CARD operates independently and coordinates services within a specific region between the state, local agencies, and school districts without duplicating services.

The main functions of each CARD is to:

- 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 ASD and related disabilities.
- Provide consultation to caregivers and professionals related to working with individuals with ASD and related disabilities.⁵

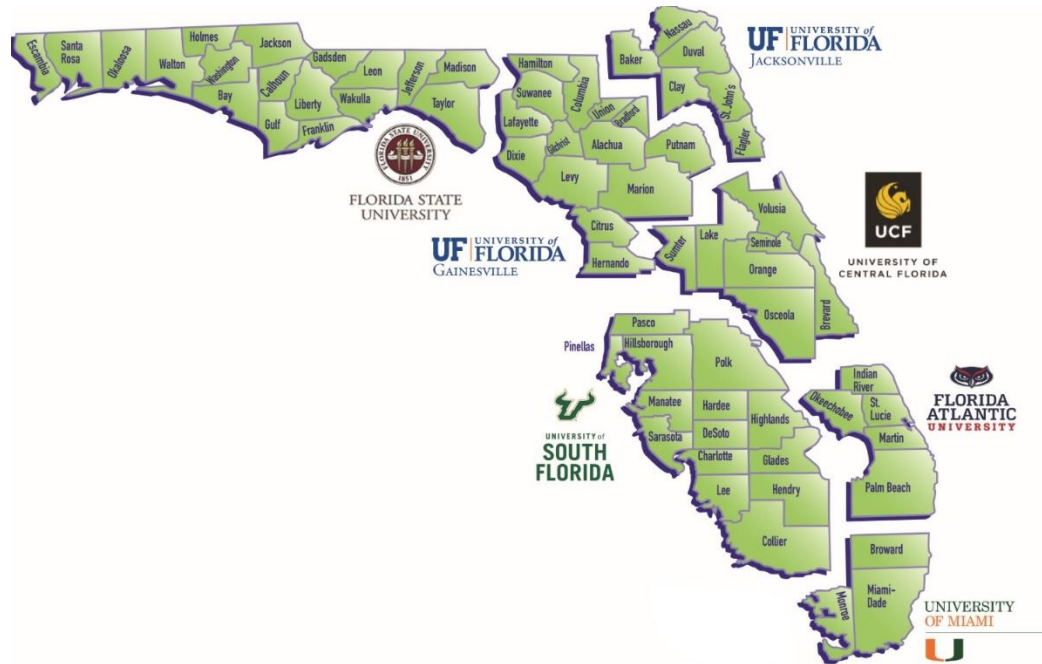
¹ National Autism Association, *About Autism and Wandering*, <https://nationalautismassociation.org/resources/wandering/> (last visited Feb. 13, 2026).

² Autism Speaks, *Wandering Prevention*, <https://www.autismspeaks.org/wandering-prevention> (last visited Feb. 13, 2026).

³ Center for Autism and Related Disabilities, *About Us* <https://www.florida-card.org/aboutUs.htm> (last visited Feb. 13, 2026).

⁴ Section 1004.55, F.S.

⁵ Center for Autism and Related Disabilities, *About Us*, <https://www.florida-card.org/aboutUs.htm> (last visited Jan. 23, 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.⁶

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 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.

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. Funding for the pilots 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, 2018.⁷

In 2018, the Legislature amended the statute to expand Project Leo to a statewide project available through all centers. Any CARD that opted to join the statewide project could

⁶ Center for Autism and Related Disabilities, *CARD Sites*, <https://www.florida-card.org/map.htm> (last visited Feb. 13, 2026).

⁷ Chapter 2016-186, Laws of Fla.

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 retained an expiration provision that set a sunset date of June 30, 2019.⁸

III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

The bill revives and amends s. 937.041, F.S., relating to the Missing Persons with Special Needs Statewide Project, which was repealed in 2019. The bill creates the Missing Persons with Special Needs Statewide Project ("Project Leo") through selected centers for autism and related disabilities, which are responsible for administering the project within their respective service areas.

The bill requires each participating Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD or center) to develop criteria for selecting individuals for participation in the project, which 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.

The bill requires each participating CARD to provide personal search-and-rescue devices to the sheriff's offices of participating counties. The bill requires county sheriffs' offices to 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.

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.

The bill removes obsolete expiration language from statute.

The bill takes effect July 1, 2026.

IV. Constitutional Issues:

A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

None.

B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:

None.

⁸ Chapter 2018-54, Laws of Fla.

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None.

D. State Tax or Fee Increases:

None.

E. Other Constitutional Issues:

None.

V. Fiscal Impact Statement:

A. Tax/Fee Issues:

None.

B. Private Sector Impact:

None.

C. Government Sector Impact:

This bill provides a nonrecurring appropriation of \$1,000,000, allocating \$250,000 in nonrecurring funds to each Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD) at the University of Florida, Florida Atlantic University, the University of South Florida, and Florida State University.

VI. Technical Deficiencies:

None.

VII. Related Issues:

None.

VIII. Statutes Affected:

The bill revives, readopts, and amends section 937.041 of the Florida Statutes.

The bill creates an undesignated section of Florida Law.

IX. Additional Information:

A. Committee Substitute – Statement of Changes:

(Summarizing differences between the Committee Substitute and the prior version of the bill.)

None.

B. Amendments:

None

This Senate Bill Analysis does not reflect the intent or official position of the bill's introducer or the Florida Senate.
