

Republic of the Philippines
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Quezon City, Metro Manila

TWENTIETH CONGRESS
First Regular Session

House Bill No. **2650**



Introduced by Honorable Ma. Alana Samantha Taliño Santos

AN ACT INSTITUTING A COMPREHENSIVE NATIONAL CARE PLAN TO ENCOURAGE COOPERATION, ACCOUNTABILITY AND RESEARCH FOR THE EDUCATION AND SUPPORT OF PERSONS WITH AUTISM AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES

EXPLANATORY NOTE

Autism, or autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), refers to a wide range of illnesses that are all characterized by difficulty with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech, and nonverbal communication. ASD is a neurological condition that affects how people perceive and relate to one another, which can cause problems with social interaction and communication.¹

According to the Autism Society of the Philippines (2018), around 1.2 million Filipinos, or about 1 in every 100 people, are affected by autism. This high number presents serious challenges, especially for parents who must navigate the lifelong developmental needs of their children with autism.²

Republic Act No. 7277, or the Magna Carta for Disabled Persons, has helped recognize and protect the rights of persons with disabilities, including those with autism. However, there are still not enough programs and services that meet the specific needs of Filipinos with autism. Bullying, discrimination, lack of affordable and accessible health and educational facilities specializing in ASD nationwide, are only a few of the perennial problems faced by our countrymen diagnosed with ASD.

In addition, healthcare costs for persons with autism are high. As autism-related services are often not integrated in health care systems, families are burdened with out-of-pocket spending. Research shows that total costs for initial evaluations alone leading to the confirmation of the autism diagnosis averaged ₱7,411.80 per child. Total caring costs or follow-up interventions including therapy, education, medications, and developmental

¹ National Nutrition Council, Autism: What you need to know.

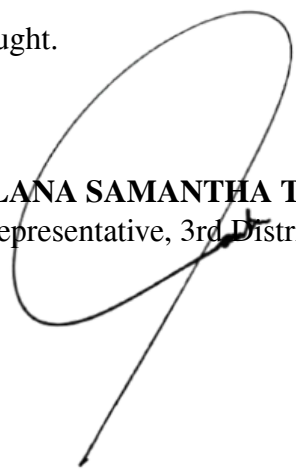
<https://www.nnc.gov.ph/regional-offices/mindanao/region-ix-zamboanga-peninsula/9648-autism-what-you-need-to-know>

² Reyes & Domingo (2025). A phenomenological study of the lived experiences of families of children with autism in the Philippines. <https://ideas.repec.org/a/bjw/socien/v15y2025i1p137-151.html>

evaluations averaged ₱38,868.6.³ These costs are too much for low-income families, which leads to many children not being able to access essential autism-related services due to financial constraints.

By employing an inter-agency approach, this legislative measure aims to address the deep gap in support provided to Filipinos with autism. This bill aims to increase awareness and proper understanding of autism through research and statistics. This bill also aims to improve access to healthcare, quality education, employment opportunities and legal aid, among others, for persons with autism. Thus, through this bill, PWAs will be guaranteed equal protection and support within our society.

As such, the approval of this Bill is earnestly sought.



MA. ALANA SAMANTHA TALIÑO SANTOS
Representative, 3rd District of Cotabato

³ Quilendrino MIO, Castor MAR, Mendoza NRNP, Vea JR, Castillo-Carandang NT. The Direct Cost of Autism and its Economic Impact on the Filipino Family. *Acta Med Philipp* [Internet]. 2022May26 [cited 2023Apr.11];56(9). Available from: <https://actamedicaphilippina.upm.edu.ph/index.php/acta/article/view/5005>

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Be it enacted by the Senate and the House of Representatives of the Philippines in Congress assembled:

Section 1. ***Short Title.*** — This Act shall be known as the “*Autism Cooperation, Accountability, Research, Education and Support (CARES) Act of 2023*”.

Section 2. ***Declaration of Policy.*** — The State hereby affirms its role in protecting and upholding the rights of all persons with disability, by giving full support to the improvement of their well-being and their integration into mainstream society. To this end, the State recognizes the need to legislate for the distinctive needs of persons with autism (PWAs) and commits itself to institutionalizing adequate policies and programs that shall increase awareness and proper understanding of autism, to develop a clear and consistent pathway to early detection and diagnosis, provide access to quality education and employment opportunities such that PWAs may live independently within the community, to minimize or completely eradicate discrimination and to enable the private sector to extend relevant services that will complement the government’s programs.

Section 3. ***Definition of Terms.*** — As used in this Act, the following terms shall mean:

- a.) *Autism* — refers to a neurological condition characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, communication, as well as by unique strengths, as defined in the latest version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders;
- b.) *Diagnosis* — refers to necessary assessments, including but not limited to neuro-psychological evaluations, genetic testing, MRIs, hearing tests, psychometric tests to diagnose or discount autism and/or developmental disabilities in individuals.

- c.) *Intervention* — refers to interceding action undertaken to help improve the autism prognosis. Intervention in autism may take the form of medical, pharmacologic, therapeutic, educational, and non-traditional habilitative care;
- d.) *Epidemiology* — refers to study and analysis of the distribution and determinants of health conditions, like autism, in defined populations.

Section 4. ***Treatment as Persons with Disability.*** — All PWAs shall be treated as persons with disability, as defined under Republic Act No. 7277, as amended. They shall be entitled to all the rights, privileges, and benefits provided for persons with disabilities under Republic Act No. 10754 and other related laws.

Section 5. ***Inter-Agency Cooperation, Accountability and Research.*** — The Department of Health (DOH), in coordination with Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), National Council on Disability Affairs (NCDA), Department of Education (DepEd), the Philippine Council for Mental Health (PCMH), other academic institutions and non-governmental organization, is hereby mandated to establish and evaluate the following activities:

- a.) Inform and educate on such disabilities to increase awareness relating to causes, early detection, management, treatment as well as development milestones;
- b.) Promote research into the development and validation of reliable screening tools for such disabilities;
- c.) Develop a curriculum for continuing education to assist individuals in recognizing the need for, and using, valid and reliable screening tools;
- d.) Promote early screening of children and individuals at higher risk for such disabilities;
- e.) Promote research to determine evidence-based practices for interventions, develop guidelines for those interventions and disseminate information related to such research and guidelines; and
- f.) Encourage public participation in decisions relating to such disabilities.

Section 6. ***Continuing Education and Training on Autism for Public Providers.*** — All officers and staff in charge of providing services to the public, including but not limited to the Department of Health (DOH), Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), Department of Education (DepEd), Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), Department of Justice (DOJ), Department of Transportation (DOTr), Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG), the Department of National Defense (DND), Department of Science and Technology (DOST), Commission on Higher Education (CHED), Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA), National Council on Disability Affairs (NCDA), Persons with Disabilities Affairs Offices (PDAOs) at the Local Government Units (LGUs), Public Safety Units (military, police, firemen and other first responders), shall undergo education and training to empower service providers to become more responsive, sensitive, and compassionate in the delivery of services to PWAs and their families.

Section 7. ***Epidemiological Surveillance.*** — The Department of Health, in coordination with different academic institutions and non-governmental organization is hereby mandated to annually conduct an epidemiological survey to determine the prevalence of autism in the

country to provide data to government agencies and the private sector, and to make necessary services available to PWAs and their families.

Section 8. ***Evidence-based Research.*** — The DOH, the Philippine Council for Health Research and Development (PCHRD), and the National Institute of Health (NIH) are mandated, in coordination with local and international mental health institutions, to promote, create, develop, and adopt research and strategic plans that will continue to determine and establish evidence-based practices for interventions in the treatment, care and integration into society of PWAs.

Section 9. ***Early Detection and Intervention of Autism.*** — The DOH, in coordination with the DepEd, is hereby mandated to establish a program for early screening and detection of autism, to provide the appropriate services to children and toddlers with developmental delays associated with autism, and to ensure the central PWD registry is updated accordingly.

Section 10. ***Mandatory PhilHealth Coverage.*** — All persons with autism shall be covered by the National Health Insurance Program of the Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PHIC). Funds necessary to ensure the enrolment of PWAs, who are currently covered under any existing category, shall be sourced from the National Health Insurance Fund of PHIC, earmarked from the proceeds of sin tax collections, as provided for in Republic Act No. 10351. It shall likewise include the cost of early screening and detection programs, as one of the available benefits of its members.

Section 11. ***Protection Against Discrimination in Schools, Colleges, Universities and Training Institutions.*** — The DepEd, CHED and TESDA shall formulate or update policies and protocols to ensure that all educational institutions shall be inclusive to learners with autism, in matters including, but not limited to, acceptance to academic or training programs, instructional support, and behavior management.

Section 12. ***Provision for Equal Opportunities for Employment.*** — The DOLE and the Civil Service Commission (CSC) shall formulate policies and programs to ensure that PWAs are provided equal opportunities for gainful employment and apprenticeship opportunities in the private and public sector.

Section 13. ***Mandatory Insurance Coverage and Prohibition Against Discrimination thereof.*** — All persons with autism shall be automatically covered by the National Health Insurance Program of the Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PHIC) as provided under Republic Act No. 11228. Funds necessary to ensure the enrolment of PWAs, who are currently covered under any existing category, shall be sourced from the National Health Insurance Fund of PHIC, earmarked from the proceeds of sin tax collections, as provided for in Republic Act No. 10351. It shall likewise include the cost of early screening, detection programs, and maintenance medical procedures such as therapies as part of the available benefits of its members. The DOH shall coordinate with the PHIC to ensure that insurance packages are available to PWAs. The Department of Finance (DOF) shall likewise issue guidelines to ensure that all insurance providers shall provide PWAs access to life insurance instruments and shall include allied medical procedures (like occupational and speech therapies) in health insurance benefits of policy holders.

Section 14. ***Protection in cases of Disaster and Emergencies.*** — The DILG, DSWD and the DND shall formulate the necessary policies and protocols to ensure that the military, public safety professionals, local government units, and first responders shall provide the necessary life-saving support to PWAs with behavioral and communication challenges, in times of disasters, calamities and other emergencies.

Section 15. ***Access to Transportation.*** — The DOTr shall formulate the necessary policies and protocols to ensure PWAs with behavioral and communication challenges and their families are given reasonable accommodation in accessing all forms of transportation by service providers over land, sea and air.

Section 16. ***Reasonable Accommodation in Legal Proceedings.*** — The DOJ shall formulate the necessary policies and protocols to ensure criminal justice agencies and professionals shall provide the necessary accommodation and protection to PWAs in behavioral and communication challenges, who may be accused of, victims of, or witnesses to crimes.

Section 17. ***The Autism Council of the Philippines.*** — There is hereby created the Autism Council of the Philippines (Council), under the Department of Health (DOH), which shall serve as an inter-agency and multi-sectoral mechanism to develop and implement a sustainable, long-term Philippine National Autism Plan.

The Council shall be responsible for:

- a) Developing and updating the Philippine National Autism Plan - a holistic roadmap in addressing the needs of Filipinos with autism and their families for the guidance of stakeholders in the private and public sectors; calibrated to meet changing needs of society and developments in technology;
- b) Designing campaigns that promote awareness of autism, and acceptance, accommodation and appreciation of PWAs;
- c) Undertaking research and/or collaborating with private and public entities on research activities regarding autism in the Philippines;
- d) Improving capabilities of government to provide nationally-available services that support PWAs and their families, in areas including, but not limited to screening, diagnoses, early intervention, education, training, employment, livelihood;
- e) Assisting the private and public sector in the design and delivery of appropriate programs for PWAs and their families;
- f) Developing capacity-building programs, incentives and awards, for PWAs in leadership, science, culture, arts and sports;
- g) Networking with other organizations, institutions and professionals working for the promotion of legislation and public programs for PWAs;
- h) Receiving donations and grants from international donor institutions, foundations and multilateral and bilateral foreign donor agencies, involved in the transfer of knowledge or direct services for PWAs; and
- i) Provide grants to duly accredited non-government organizations involved in providing direct services to PWAs.

Section 18. ***Composition of the Autism Council of the Philippines.*** — The Council shall be composed of the following:

- a) The DOH secretary as chairperson;
- b) The DSWD Secretary as Vice-Chairperson;
- c) The DepEd secretary as Member;
- d) The DILG Secretary as Member;
- e) The DOLE secretary as Member;
- f) The NCDA Executive Director as Member;
- g) The NIH Head as Member;
- h) The Philippine Information Agency (PIA) Head as Member,.
- i) Three (3) representatives from the Philippine Society of Behavioral and Development Pediatrics, the Philippine Association of Speech Pathologists, and the Philippine Association of Occupational Therapists, as Members;
- j) Two (2) representatives from the Autism Society Philippines, as Members; and
- k) One (1) individual with autism, as Member

The members of the Council from the government agencies and institutions may designate their permanent representatives who shall have a rank not lower than an assistant secretary as their official representatives in the meetings of the Council.

The six (6) appointive members of the Council shall be appointed by the President of the Philippines, from a list of five (5) nominees from each sector, who shall serve for a term of three (3) years, and renewable for another term; *Provided*, That the person appointed shall be of good moral character, of unquestionable integrity; with expertise and experience of at least six (6) years in the field of autism, service delivery and other related fields; and that in the event of a vacancy, the successor appointed to fill the same shall serve only the unexpired portion of the term of the member he/she succeeds to.

The Council shall have a Secretariat which will coordinate the functions and organize the services as may be required by the Council in the exercise of its functions. It shall be headed by an Executive Director to be appointed by the Council.

All members of the Council shall receive emoluments as may be determined by the Council, in accordance with existing budget and accounting rules and regulations.

Section 19. ***Programs and Service of the Autism Council of the Philippines.*** — The Council shall design, implement and deliver programs and services, relevant to children and adults with autism and their families, under the following areas:

- a) Information campaigns;
- b) Research;
- c) Assessment, diagnosis, and intervention;
- d) Education, sports, and arts;
- e) PWA and family support;
- f) Employment and livelihood; and
- g) Residential and hospice care.

Section 20. ***Meetings.*** — The Council shall meet at least once a month upon a three-day notice signed by the Chairperson, or as often as necessary upon the written request signed by two-thirds (2/3) of its members. The presence of a majority of the members of the Council shall constitute a quorum in order for it to conduct its business.

Section 21. ***The National Autism CARES Plan.*** — The Philippine Council for Mental Health (PCMH), a multi-sector body established by the Mental Health Act, in coordination with other government agencies and stakeholders, shall develop, regularly update and monitor the implementation of the Autism Cares Plan (ACP), a holistic medium-term plan that shall embody the provisions of this Act, in order to respond to the needs of PWAs and their families for the guidance of the stakeholders in public and private sector. The PCMH shall likewise coordinate the development and implementation of necessary policies and programs to operationalize the ACP and to ensure the needs of PWAs are served.

Section 22. ***Appropriation.*** — The amount necessary to carry out the provisions of this Act shall be included and incorporated in the annual general appropriations of the DOH.

Section 23. ***Separability Clause.*** — If any provision of this Act is declared invalid or unconstitutional, the provisions not affected thereby shall continue to be in full force and effect.

Section 24. ***Repealing Clause.*** — All laws, executive orders, presidential decrees, presidential proclamations, letter of instruction, rules and regulations or parts thereof inconsistent with the provisions of this Act are hereby repealed or modified accordingly.

Section 25. ***Effectivity.*** — This Act shall take effect fifteen (15) days after its publication in the Official Gazette or in a newspaper of general circulation.

Approved,