

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

TWENTIETH CONGRESS
First Regular Session

HOUSE BILL NO. 8965



Introduced by Representative JEFFREY SORIANO

EXPLANATORY NOTE

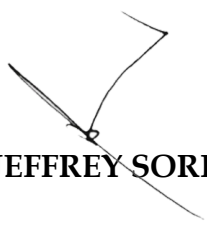
This bill seeks to establish a comprehensive national policy that will ensure early detection, inclusive education, continuous support services, and full societal participation for persons with autism (PWAs). It aims to institutionalize a coordinated and rights-based framework that will eliminate discrimination and guarantee access to essential programs and opportunities.

Autism is a lifelong developmental condition that affects communication, behavior, and social interaction. While awareness has increased in recent years, significant gaps remain in the Philippine setting, particularly in diagnosis, service accessibility, and inclusive systems. Estimates indicate that around one (1) in every one hundred (100) Filipinos may be on the autism spectrum, equivalent to approximately 1.2 million individuals nationwide. Despite this, support services are limited and unevenly distributed, with most resources concentrated in urban centers. Available data further show that only a small number of schools are equipped to address special education needs, and even fewer provide appropriate therapeutic interventions, underscoring the inadequacy of current infrastructure.

The proposed measure addresses these gaps by promoting inclusion and safeguarding PWAs from discrimination in schools, workplaces, and public institutions. It provides for a unified and long-term national strategy that harmonizes efforts across sectors to improve service delivery, accessibility, and overall quality of life.

Ultimately, this bill seeks to uphold the dignity, rights, and potential of every Filipino with autism by fostering an inclusive and supportive society where PWAs are empowered to thrive, contribute, and live independently.

In view of the foregoing, the immediate passage of this bill is earnestly sought.


HON. JEFFREY SORIANO

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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

Be it enacted by the Senate and 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”.

SEC. 2. *Declaration of Policy.* – It is hereby declared the policy of the State to affirm its role in protecting and upholding the rights of all disabled persons, 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 institutionalize 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 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.

SEC. 3. *Definition of Terms.* – As used in this Act:

a) Autism or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) refers to a neurological condition characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, and 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 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 the study and analysis of the distribution and determinants of health conditions, like autism in defined populations.

SEC. 4. *Treatment as Persons with Disability (PWD)*. – In accordance with Republic Act No. 7277, otherwise known as the “*Magna Carta for Disabled Persons*”, as amended, all PWAs shall be treated as Persons with Disability (PWD). They shall likewise be entitled to all the rights, privileges, and benefits provided for PWDs under Republic Act No. 10754 and other related laws.

SEC. 5. *Inter-Agency Cooperation, Accountability and Research*. – The Department of Health (DOH), in coordination with the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), Department of Education (DepEd), the Philippine Council for Mental Health (PCMH), other academic institutions and non-governmental organizations, is hereby mandated to establish and evaluate activities to:

a) Inform and educate on such disabilities to increase awareness relating to causes, early detection, management, treatment as well as developmental 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 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.

SEC. 6. *Continuing Education and Training on Autism for Public Service Providers*. – All officers and staff-in-charge of providing services to the public, including but not limited to the DOH, DSWD, DepEd, Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), Department of Justice (DOJ), Department of Transportation (DOTr), Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG), 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 Safe Units

(military, police, firemen and other first responders), shall undergo mandatory continuing education to empower service providers to become more responsive, sensitive, and compassionate in the delivery of services to PWAs and their families.

SEC. 7. *Epidemiological Surveillance Programs.* — The DOH, in coordination with different academic institutions and non-governmental organizations, is hereby mandated to conduct an epidemiological survey to determine the prevalence of autism in the county annually to provide data to government agencies and the private sector, to make necessary services available to PWAs and their families.

SEC. 8. *Evidence-based Research.* — The DOH, the Philippine Council for Health and 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.

SEC. 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.

SEC. 10. *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 supports, and behavior management.

SEC. 11. *Provision at 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 sectors.

SEC. 12. *Mandatory Insurance Coverage and Prohibition Against Discrimination thereof.* — All PWAs 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, otherwise known as the “Sin Tax Reform Act of 2012”.

It shall likewise include the cost of early screening and detection programs, as one of the available benefits of its members. 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.

SEC. 13. *Protection in cases of Disaster and Emergencies.* — The DILG, DSWD, and DND shall formulate the necessary policies and protocols to ensure that the military, public safety professionals, local government units (LGUs), and first responders shall provide the necessary lifesaving support to PWAs with behavioral and communication challenges, in times of disasters, calamities, and other emergencies.

SEC. 14. *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.

SEC. 15. *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 accommodations and protections to PWAs in behavioral and communication challenges, who may be the accused of victims or witnesses to crimes.

SEC. 16. *The Autism CARES Plan.* — The PCMH, a multi-sector body established by Republic Act No. 11036, or 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 sectors. The PCMH shall likewise coordinate the development and implementation of necessary policies and programs to operationalize all ACPs and to ensure the needs of PWAs are served.

SEC. 17. *Appropriations.* — The amount necessary to carry out the provisions of this Act shall be included and incorporated in the annual general appropriations of the DOH.

SEC. 18. *Separability Clause.* — If any portion or provision of this Act is subsequently declared invalid or unconstitutional, other provisions hereof which are not affected thereby shall remain in full force and effect.

SEC. 19. *Repealing Clause.* — All laws, decrees, orders, rules and regulations, or parts thereof inconsistent with the provisions of this Act are hereby repealed or modified accordingly.

SEC. 20. *Effectivity.* — This Act shall take effect fifteen (15) days after its complete publication in the Official Gazette or in a newspaper of general circulation.

Approved,