

Senate Health and Human Services Committee

Sophie Walsh 271-3469

HB 1337, repealing the New Hampshire council on autism spectrum disorders.

Hearing Date: April 15, 2026

Time Opened: 9:16 a.m.

Time Closed: 10:08 a.m.

Members of the Committee Present: Senators Rochefort, Avard, Birdsell, Prentiss and Long

Members of the Committee Absent: None

Bill Analysis: This bill repeals the New Hampshire council on autism spectrum disorders.

Sponsors:

Rep. W. MacDonald

Who supports the bill: 7 people signed in support of the bill. Full sign in sheets are available upon request by contacting the Legislative Aide, Sophie Walsh (sophie.walsh@gc.nh.gov).

Who opposes the bill: 70 people signed in opposition to the bill. Full sign in sheets are available upon request by contacting the Legislative Aide, Sophie Walsh (sophie.walsh@gc.nh.gov).

Who is neutral on the bill: No one.

Summary of testimony presented:

Senator David Rochefort, Senate District 1

- Senator Rochefort introduced House Bill 1337 on behalf of the prime sponsor.

Representative Jerry Stringham, Grafton – District 3

- Representative Stringham stated that he is speaking in opposition to the bill.
- This follows a bill on the same subject from last year, when the Council on Autism Spectrum Disorders came to the legislature seeking help. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Council largely ceased proper function, and they were seeking an amendment to statute that would allow them to have meetings with quorums and make other reasonable changes.

- In that process, the House began looking at disbanding the group itself. The Senate amended the bill back to the original version requested by the Council, and the bill died when the House did not concur.
- Since then, the Council has been reconstituted. An annual report has been filed for the first time in several years, and the Governor has now filled 6 of the Council's vacancies.
- This is an important topic for families affected by autism. Representative Stringham listened to the House testimony and noted that even those concerned about the Council agreed that it addresses a population not addressed by any other similar function.
- Representative Stringham noted that there is no appropriation to keep the Council running.
- Senator Rochefort noted that he had trouble finding the annual report online. He explained that the original legislation outlined a number of objectives that needed to be worked on and asked how many of those have come forth. He also inquired about any legislation that has been proposed or enacted as a result of the Council's work.
- Representative Stringham confirmed that there has been some work done that was promoted by the Council, such as the blue envelope program for interactions with law enforcement.
- Senator Rochefort said it sounds like there has been some renewed energy around the Council, and Representative Stringham confirmed that he thinks it has already happened. He noted that he read the annual report online.
- Senator Rochefort asked when Representative Stringham expects things to be fully running again, and Representative Stringham said he thinks very soon. He noted that it took a while to get the vacancies filled.
- Senator Avard referenced the House Majority Report, noting a statement that the Council operates with limited transparency and oversteps statutory authority. He asked for Representative Stringham's thoughts on how that conclusion was made.
- Representative Stringham said he did not hear any evidence of that when he listened to the testimony, emphasizing that he does not see any self-enrichment or a lack of transparency.

Amy Rheume

- Ms. Rheume stated that she has a 20 year old son on the autism spectrum. She is excited about the blue envelope program because he is currently learning to drive.
- Ms. Rheume has experience in the applied behavioral analysis field, working with students with severe autism every day. Until last month, she has never

been able to point parents to a place with resources, but now she can direct them to the Council's website.

- Since her son's diagnosis, she has had to search far and wide for resources. While there are a lot of people with resources in the state, there has never been one place to go to.
- Ms. Rheume recently became a member of the Council. She attended meetings before COVID-19 and felt like people were just there to have a position. Now, she feels like there are people who genuinely want to help.
- Ms. Rheume explained that because everyone is so tired, they need a place to go that is easy and accessible.
- When Ms. Rheume's son got diagnosed 16 years ago, 1 in 150 children had autism. Today, it is 1 in 31 children, equating to 4% of people in New Hampshire.
- Senator Rochefort asked Ms. Rheume where she thinks this program falls short, as someone who has utilized it both personally and professionally.
- Ms. Rheume explained that some people may be seeking immediate perfection, but the Council is a work in progress. She emphasized that they now have subcommittees, are developing resources, and have different people come speak at meetings.
- Senator Rochefort asked if Ms. Rheume thinks that killing this bill would be a motivating factor for Council members to communicate better and provide more resources, knowing there are people who want to disband the Council.
- Ms. Rheume said she does not think so, as they are already doing everything they can from her perspective.
- Senator Birdsell asked how the blue envelope program works.
- Ms. Rheume noted that other states have adopted it and explained that it is something a person with autism would have if they are ever in an emergency or get pulled over. The envelope contains individualized information about the individual's communication style and needs.
- Senator Birdsell confirmed that this essentially gives law enforcement a heads up, and Ms. Rheume confirmed.

Virginia Cannon

- Ms. Cannon stated that she is an adult with autism speaking on her own behalf. She joined the Council because her daughter has autism and is more significantly impacted by it.
- Ms. Cannon is tired of fighting for a seat at the table and to have her concerns be listened to.
- During COVID-19, the Council dwindled with the old leadership disappearing. Volunteers had to scrape together and do the best they could with their limited budget to provide administrative assistance for RSA 91-A compliance.

- In Ms. Cannon's opinion, there is a group wanting to disband the Council because it does not provide direct services. However, the purpose of the Council is to provide support for families, not services.
- The Council has reconvened with new leadership. The current leadership is looking to have people with autism take over, but those individuals must be sought out and supported to do so.
- The Council is meeting regularly and doing everything thing they can at this point. Ms. Cannon noted that some of the charge given to the Council is more than a volunteer group can do, such as grant writing.
- Ms. Cannon believes the Council does good work within the limitations of being a volunteer group with only administrative support.
- Senator Rochefort asked if Ms. Cannon said the Council has 4 administrative assistants, and she clarified that they only have funding for RSA 91-A administrative support. It is not a full time position.
- Senator Prentiss asked if Ms. Cannon currently serves on the Council, and she confirmed.
- Senator Prentiss asked how long Ms. Cannon has served on the Council.
- Ms. Cannon explained that while she does not specifically remember, she joined when the Council requested that the legislature allow for a member who is on the autism spectrum to serve as appointed by the Council. At that time, most of the slots were filled by professionals with the exception of one person with autism and one open position for a parent of someone with autism.
- Senator Prentiss noted that it seems like Ms. Cannon has operational knowledge on the Council's history and current status. She asked if Ms. Cannon has any context on the comments made in the House Majority Report about the Council overstepping statutory authority.
- Ms. Cannon explained that while she is not familiar with the Majority Report, she thinks the limited transparency piece has been addressed. She told a story about how someone was upset after making a 91-A request when one of the pages they received was almost fully redacted. This page was the resume of someone who applied for the administrative position, so it was redacted as a personnel record.
- Senator Birdsell asked how many members of the Council are currently people with autism or a family member of someone with autism.
- Ms. Cannon explained that all 6 of the new appointed members fall within that category.

Marissa Berg, Community Support Network, Inc.

- Ms. Berg outlined written testimony submitted to the Committee, containing the Council's 2025 annual report.

- The Council currently has 21 seated members, with two vacancies for the Governor or a designee and a representative of the New Hampshire Medical Society.
- Ms. Berg reviewed the information sessions that the Council has been hosting, emphasizing that they are trying to bring a diverse set of information forth to enable access and share best practices.
- A lot of these actions are based on feedback sessions hosted by the Council in November 2024. The outcomes of these sessions are included in the annual report.
- This Council is the only entity that supports people whether or not they have access to Medicaid Home and Community-Based Care Waiver services.
- The Council has confirmed with a member of the State Attorney General's office that they are in compliance with RSA 91-A.
- Senator Rochefort asked if Ms. Berg would say that the current scrutiny will be a motivating factor for new energy to ensure the Council's objectives are being achieved.
- Ms. Berg emphasized that there is a new set of motivated individuals ensuring the Council is working for people with autism and their families.
- Senator Rochefort asked if Ms. Berg thinks creating a future sunset for the Council would create the wanted charge of energy.
- Ms. Berg explained that there was some discussion last session about giving the Council time to re-energize, and members have taken that to heart and have been working hard. This is a re-energized Council with robust participation from members who are dedicated to this population.
- Senator Avard referenced prior testimony about the rate of diagnoses and asked if the Council covers topics like the cost of services to families and the state.
- Ms. Berg explained that the current focus is on the gaps in services. While it is not necessarily outlined in statute, there is nothing prohibiting the Council from having such conversations about costs.
- Senator Long referenced prior testimony and asked if Ms. Berg sees the purpose of the Council as offering resources, or potentially offering services.
- Ms. Berg explained that the Council does not have the bandwidth or statutory authority to provide direct services. It is intended to be a resource and provide information to families on accessing services in their communities.

Karen Blake

- Ms. Blake explained that she has a son who experiences autism. While she is not currently a member of the Council, she participates as much as she can.
- The Council has been somewhere for family members of those with autism to seek specific information.

- Ms. Blake does not think this is the right time to make this change. She explained that this Council covers all individuals who experience autism, not just those covered by the Quality Council.
- She asked the Committee to let the Council continue to evolve and grow, so it can be there for these individuals, their families and friends, and the professionals.
- Senator Avarad asked if the blue envelope program is for all first responders.
- Ms. Blake explained that it is an optional program for anyone with autism to carry with them when driving. It contains instructions for interaction and copies of important documents like license and registration.
- Senator Avarad asked if there are any other ideas like the blue envelope program currently in process, and Ms. Blake said she does not know.
- Senator Rochefort noted that the Council has 23 members and recalled that in his experience, bigger commissions can be less efficient. He asked if the Council is too big and if the scope of 7 objectives is too large.
- Ms. Blake said she does not think size is much of an issue, emphasizing the importance of different perspectives and noting that the Quality Council is equally big.
- She explained that scope and membership was addressed in Representative Stringham's prior legislation, noting that the Quality Council allows people experiencing disability or their families to attend remotely if due to disability. This would have made it easier for people to participate, especially given the size of the state.
- Senator Birdsell asked if the Council has trouble getting a quorum on a consistent basis.
- Ms. Blake explained that while she is not a seated member, she does know that they do not run the meeting if there is no quorum. She is able to attend the monthly meetings more often than not.