

April 1, 2025

Dear Chair Hoffman, and members of the Human Services Committee,

I am writing to you as the mother of a silly, inquisitive, adventurous autistic 4-year-old boy, to strongly urge you to support SF3040, a bill that would allow families like mine to use waivers, grants, and Community First Services and Supports (CFSS) to pay for swimming lessons for our children.

As many of you are aware, children with autism struggle with safety awareness, including an increased risk of wandering or elopement. For families like mine, the possibility of drowning is an ever-present concern. Tragically, this fear is not unfounded. In the year alone, two autistic boys drowned in the Twin Cities after wandering from their homes. Their mothers are mothers like me who were doing their best but in a split second their worst fears came true.

For autistic children, swimming lessons are not just about learning to float or swim; they are a matter of life and death. Drowning is one of the leading causes of death of autistic children and adults, according to the National Autism Association. Research at Columbia University found that autistic children are 160 times more likely to die from drowning compared to their neurotypical peers. Parents like me live not only with those statistics in their head, but the faces of children that they have prayed for, searched for, and held in their hearts.

Every time an autistic child drowns, I see my child's face in theirs. He, like many, is drawn to water. And he, like many, has not received a formal education in water safety from a professional. Swimming is one of the most effective ways to help our children gain water safety awareness and reduce their risk of drowning. Also, when taught in the right environment with an instructor trained in teaching autistic students, swimming lessons can be a great sensory experience for our kids.

However, my child can't attend a normal swim class. He can't handle the noise of a pool with multiple classes happening at the same time as well as many parents watching. He struggles with impulse control and will wander off on the pool deck, or try to swim alone without an adult's help while the swim instructor is attending to another child. He can't operate in ratio, so I need to pay for specialized instruction. Specialized instruction that runs about \$75 a half hour lesson. Over double what I pay for my other child.

Many families just can't afford the cost of specialized swimming lessons out of their own pocket. Families are already struggling with the financial burden of supporting an autistic child. They often have to pay for therapy, medical treatments, medication, communication devices, sensory items, and other services our children require. Adding swimming lessons to that list can be a significant hardship.

That is why I am urging you to support SF3040, which would allow families to use waivers, grants, and CFSS to help cover the cost of swimming lessons for our children. Our waivers are meant to support our children so they can live safe and full lives in community. Swimming lessons do just that. While we can use waivers to add fences, locks, and alarms to our homes, we can't use them to give our children the best chance of survival if physical barriers fail or they are out in community and manage to slip away from a teacher, caregiver, or family member. This bill would give families like mine the resources to ensure our children have the tools they need to stay safe, and it would

help prevent tragic accidents that reverberate through the souls of every caregiver of an autistic child.

I ask that you consider the many families in Minnesota who live in constant fear of losing their children to drowning, and I urge you to take action in support of SF3040. Swimming lessons are not just a luxury—they are a crucial investment in our children's safety.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I hope you will support this important bill to protect children with autism and their families.

Sincerely,

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Mother to Tony and Mabel

Chair, Bloomington Early Learning Advisory Council

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