



Autism Advisory Council

August 17, 2026, at 2:00 p.m.

General Assembly Building, House Room B-205

<https://dls.virginia.gov/commissions/aac.htm?x=aac>

The Autism Advisory Council (the Council) met in Richmond with Delegate Laura Jane Cohen, chair, presiding.¹ The meeting began with the brief reintroduction of members followed by presentations and discussion. Materials presented at the meeting are accessible through the [Council's meetings webpage](#). Video recording of the meeting is available [here](#).

Presentation: Vocational Rehabilitation Program and Employment Transition Services

Karen Akom, Ed.D., Director of Field Operations, Virginia Commonwealth University, Center on Transition Innovations

Donna Bonessi, Director of Employment Services and Special Programs, Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services

Ms. Bonessi began the presentation by going over the services offered by the Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services' (DARS) Division of Rehabilitative Services (DRS). She also addressed the funding sources for those services and how DRS interacts with other institutions.

Ms. Akom discussed specific programs developed by Virginia Commonwealth University's Center on Transition Innovations and used as part of the services offered by DRS.

Ms. Bonessi finished the presentation by discussing data relevant to DARS services provided in the last year: individuals served, communities represented, demographic makeup, etc. Questions from the Council were answered throughout the presentation.

Presentation: Autism Training for General Education Teachers

Jennifer O'Berry, MEd, BCBA, LBA, Specialist, Autism, Intellectual Disabilities, and Assistive Technology, Virginia Department of Education

Samantha T. Gregory, Ed.S., NCSP, Coordinator of Specially Designed Behavior Intervention and Improvement, Virginia Department of Education

Ms. O'Berry and Ms. Gregory discussed autism-specific professional development training available through the Virginia Department of Education (VDE) to general education teachers. Provisions of the Code of Virginia require that school divisions provide such training but

¹ **Members Present:** Delegate Laura Jane Cohen (chair), Senator Stella G. Pekarsky (vice-chair), Senator Tara A. Durant, Delegate Kathy K.L. Tran, Samantha Gregory (proxy for Jenna Conway, ex officio), Conner Cummings, Parthenia Dinora (virtual), Ann Flippin, Ann Bevan (proxy for Steve Ford, ex officio), Jaime Hanks, Whitney King, Giovanni Knight, Ethan Long, Mia Louria, Tonya Milling, Nedra Moncrief-Craig (ex officio), Jennifer Krajewski (proxy for Teri Morgan, ex officio), Rose Nevill, Heather Norton (proxy for Daryl Washington, ex officio), Toni Hayes, (proxy for Cameron Webb, ex officio)

Members Absent: Delegate Patrick A. Hope, Delegate Philip A. Scott, Beth Davis, Brian McCann, Duke Storen (ex officio)

participation by individual instructors and staff is voluntary. VDE provides an approved statewide training program but allows individual districts to produce their own training programs. The goals and content of such training programs were discussed. Questions from the Council were answered throughout the presentation.

Discussion

Delegate Cohen opted to cut from the agenda the general discussion topic following the presentations because extensive questions asked by members during the presentations were answered by the speakers.

Public Comment and Next Meeting

Public comment was offered virtually and in person. The next meeting of the Council is scheduled for September 24, 2026, at 10 a.m. in House Room B-205 of the General Assembly Building.

For more information, see the [*Council's website*](#) or contact the Division of Legislative Services staff:

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