

To Chairman Ginter, Vice Chair Condit, Ranking Member Boyd and members of the Community and Family Advancement Committee:

Good Afternoon:

I wish to thank my Sigma Chi Fraternity Brother, co-sponsor Representative Dave Greenspan, for introducing me to co-sponsor Representative Scott Wiggam, and extend my thanks to all members who are supporting House Bill 115. I offer my testimony today as someone in dual roles: as a Sergeant with the Cleveland Police Department, and as the father of a son with Autism. Both are very critical to me, I cherish them, they make me proud. Some parents name their kids after actors or sports figures; we named our son after a true hero, a friend and fellow CPD Detective that lost his life in the line of duty. He is always going to need his mother and I, and quite honestly, I am going to need him. There is still rarely a day when I tuck him in, and he tells me he loves me, that I don't shed tears, because there are so many parents that never hear those words. So the thought of my son one day being unintentionally harmed by a fellow officer, and a fellow officer harming him only because he or she wasn't provided with the proper training or real time information, is a risk that I cannot idly sit back and allow to happen when offered the opportunity to provide you with some insight today.

As police recruits, we are taught from day one, through words, dash cam videos, and practical exercises, that the "hands kill." A suspect's hands can grab you, pull you, strike you, disarm you, produce a gun or knife, and a person doing anything with their hands besides exactly what and where we tell them to do causes a very heightened level of anxiety and what some see as an over-reaction. In reality, we can only react to a situation, and if someone suddenly reaches into their pocket, or tucks their hands under their armpits, or begins to shake their hands rapidly, turns their head or body away from us, begins to run away, jump up and down, run toward us, or screams at us, we will most likely interpret that as aggression and an intent to harm us. But what I have just described to you are only some of the normal, daily, and sometimes uncontrollable and unmanageable behaviors demonstrated by people on the Autism Spectrum Disorder, and they are actions that my little boy does almost every single day. Remember, I said normal, because he is our son, we see him every day and try to interpret his feelings and frustration of being unable to fully speak or understand us. Now place him in front of a 24 year old rookie cop as a future teenager or young adult. Sure, his mother and I do and will continue to provide him with every therapy and piece of technology available to lessen the effects of this disorder, but they will always be there.

In 18 years as a police officer, I'd like to think I've helped many people including fellow officers. We don't always get it right, but we sure try, and I've never gone into work hoping that I got to harm someone that day. We do the job for those among us that need protection the most, but we can only make decisions based upon the information available to us at the split second when we need to decide. Hindsight is a luxury. Sometimes those scenarios lead to unintended outcomes, such as officer involved shootings. If this legislation prevents some of those awful outcomes, and we take this opportunity to also expand training for our law enforcement officers in recognizing ASD traits, then we will save lives, period.

Ladies and Gentlemen: your vote in support of House Bill 115 gives our special needs citizens the ability to be special, among all of us as American citizens. They have every right and deserve every opportunity to drive and be social and attend events where they may come in contact with law enforcement, and law enforcement must be trained to respect, assist and recognize that those with Autism and other social disorders do not seek non-compliance, they struggle to overcome it. Your vote helps to enable citizens like my son give law enforcement a very clear and passionate message should they choose to register, and notifies an officer that this encounter will take some extra time, understanding, and compassion:

"Dear Police Officer: Today you and I came into contact with each other. Perhaps I ran a stop sign or I was in a car with my friends and we were playing our music a little too loud; perhaps you knocked on my door to do a welfare check, or I was walking down the street appearing a little confused or lost, and someone reported me as suspicious because I was far from home and I was scared. Strangers and new things and new places can make me very nervous if I'm not prepared ahead of time. When this happens I may seek comfort in tight places, like my pockets, or I may curl up, or my hands may shake, I may look away from you or even walk or run away. What you say and how I process your words may not always match, so I wanted to advise you in advance through my Ohio license /identification card and LEADS that I may not understand what you want me to do, but please be patient with me and speak softly. I'm just a little frightened because I don't know you. I mean you no harm, and I know that you don't want to harm me because you're here to protect me. We both want to go home to our families that love us."

On behalf of parents and cops just like me, and our son and those beautiful souls just like him: thank you for your time today and please vote YES on House Bill 115.

Sincerely,

Thomas Ross

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