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Committees

Energy and Natural Resources
Primary and Secondary Education
Ways & Means

To: Chair Abrams, Vice Chair Williams, Ranking Member Brown, and members of the Criminal Justice Committee

From: Rep. Beth Lear

Date: June 4, 2024

Re: Sponsor testimony for House Bill 531 – Braden’s Law

Chair Abrams, Vice Chair Williams, Ranking Member Brown, and members of the Criminal Justice Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on HB 531, Braden’s Law.

On October 17, 2021, Olentangy High School student, Braden Markus, was contacted by an individual on social media who sent him lewd pictures while pretending to be a 15-year-old girl. This “girl” requested Braden send the same inappropriate photos in exchange. After Braden complied with the initial request, the perpetrator immediately demanded \$1,800 and threatened to release the photo on social media if Braden did not send him the money.

As a sophomore in high school, Braden did not know what to do and the individual continued to emotionally torture and threaten the boy. It only took 27 minutes from the initiation of the crime to push Braden Markus to take his own life.

The family was in shock. Braden was active in sports and school. His death made no sense, and his parents were desperate to understand what happened. Unfortunately, because of current law, they had to wait ten months to gain access to his phone to begin to understand what drove him to suicide.

HB 531 represents a critical step forward in our ongoing efforts to combat sextortion and protect our citizens. The offense of sextortion is created in this bill and applies to anyone who threatens to release, exhibit, or distribute private images of another for financial gain and the penalty begins as an F3. If the person being extorted is a minor, elderly, or disabled, the penalty rises to F1. This includes compelling individuals to perform acts against their will, inducing them to commit offenses, obtaining additional private images, or obtaining anything of value through coercion.

Braden’s Law also adds the offense of Aggravated Sexual Extortion to our criminal code, which allows the court to impose an additional 10-year jail time if the crime results in bodily harm or death of the victim. Had the bill been in effect when Braden died, the criminals would face up to 21 years in prison.

As an Olentangy graduate myself, this tragedy hits close to home. Friends, neighbors, and the Markus family are urging us to protect their children and all Ohio children as soon as possible. The prosecutors are on board, the Attorney General is on board and the Lieutenant Governor asks that we pass this bill to Senate as soon as possible. Now my joint sponsor, Rep. Lorenz, is going to provide you with some additional information about the bill. Thank you for your time.