

# Criminal Justice Committee

Testimony in Support of Braden's Law

Provided by Jennifer Markus

June 11, 2024

Good afternoon Chairwoman Abrams, Vice Chair Williams, Ranking Member Brown, and members of the Criminal Justice Committee.

My name is Rachel Winder.

Jennifer Markus is my friend and neighbor. My son and her son, Braden Markus grew up together and they should have graduated high school together last month. Jennifer couldn't be here today and she asked me to read a short statement on her behalf in support of House Bill 531, known as Braden's Law.

My name is Jennifer Markus, a proud mother of two children, Ella and Braden Markus. I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony in support of Braden's Law.

Unfortunately, on October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2021 our son Braden took his own life. Ten grueling months after his death, we discovered he was the victim of sextortion. We were unable to access his phone due to privacy restrictions, which prevented us from taking any action to prevent his tragic fate. Braden had been friended on Instagram by someone he thought was an 18-year-old girl from a local high school, but in reality, this person was not who she appeared to be. Within minutes of exchanging messages, the conversation took a disturbing turn, and within 27 minutes, Braden took his own life. He was 15 years old.

Financial sextortion is the fastest growing cybercrime in the United States. Sextortion is the practice of extorting money for sexual favors from someone by threatening to reveal evidence of their sexual activity. Our family had never heard of sextortion before Braden's death, and if we had been aware of it, we could have warned our son about its dangers, potentially saving his life.

It is essential to take action to protect our youth and their future in the ever-growing digital world. These perpetrators are inside our homes EVERY SINGLE DAY because of smartphones, gaming consoles, and the easy access to computers. Big Tech companies are NOT protecting our youth, they are just enabling them easy access to the world, allowing predators to take advantage of our vulnerable youth population. Studies have shown the frontal lobe is not developed before adulthood, and the gamma-aminobutyric acid neurotransmission is not fully developed during adolescent years, resulting in impulsivity. Braden did not see a way out.

Because these crimes are new, legislation is needed now to protect all Ohio children from this heinous crime!

Braden's sister Ella was one of the first to find Braden. She was 12 years old at the time. It was suggested that we apply for victims of crime compensation to help pay for numerous costs surrounding Braden's death, such as Ella's counseling, crime scene clean-up, funeral expenses and more. As if we weren't dealing with enough, I went ahead and applied. Spending hours trying to find receipts to upload. A few months after applying for compensation came the decision that we weren't approved for reimbursement of anything. Essentially we were told that while there was a preponderance amount of evidence Braden was the victim of extortion, and extortion does not constitute "criminally injurious conduct". There is a text thread between Braden and the criminals that begs to differ. Numerous times Braden asked why are you doing this to me, I am only 15, I will just kill myself. He begged for them to just spare him. 27 minutes from initial contact is all it took for Braden to end his life with his father and sister home!

This is a story that no one can make up, from start to finish! Braden's Law has three parts, gaining access to minor's phones in a timely manner, locking the criminals up for an extensive amount of time, and offering financial support from the victims of crime fund to families in need.

Time is of the essence. We must act now, I encourage everyone involved to get this law passed as quickly as possible.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Markus