

**Testimony in Support of HB 531 – Braden’s Law**  
**Before the House Criminal Justice Committee**  
**Chairwoman Cindy Abrams**  
**by Sheriff Jeff Balzer**  
**Delaware County Sheriff’s Office**  
**June 11, 2024**

Chairwoman Abrams, Vice-Chair Williams, Ranking Member Brown and Members of the House Criminal Justice Committee:

My name is Jeff Balzer and I am the Sheriff of Delaware County. I am here today on behalf of the Delaware County Sheriff’s Office and as a member of the Buckeye State Sheriffs’ Association (BSSA) Legislative Committee to offer our full support of Braden’s Law, House Bill 531 that will criminalize Sextortion in Ohio.

On Sunday October 17, 2021, Olentangy High School student Braden Markus was contacted on social media by a person posing as a teenage girl who sent explicit photos and requested the same from Braden. When the person convinced Braden to send a similar photo of himself, that individual demanded thousands of dollars and threatened to release the photo of Braden on social media.

Tragically - 27 minutes from the initial contact, Braden took his own life.

Braden fell victim to a horrendous act known as Sextortion.

As you are aware, sexual extortion or “Sextortion” occurs when an online predator tricks someone into providing them images, and then demands money, more images or makes other demands – while threatening to share the images with the victim’s family, friends, and community if they don’t comply.

I wish I could say that the crime perpetrated against Braden was an isolated event – but it’s not. We frequently investigate similar reports, and in fact, just a few days ago my Office replied to another complaint, this time from an 18 year old young man who provided explicit photos and was subsequently blackmailed. Fortunately, this teenager and his family quickly contacted my Office and we are investigating the incident. All too often people are targeted on social media, especially our youth, by predators who care only about their ill-gotten gains and not the tragedy they leave behind.

The effect this crime has had on the Markus family cannot be overstated. While we all grieve for Braden, it's not enough. The Markus family has bravely stepped forward to help ensure other families won't suffer the same heartbreak. The compassionate and determined law enforcement officers in Ohio will do our part by working with our partners at every level of government to relentlessly pursue those who prey upon our communities.

House Bill 531 – Braden's Law – provides important tools for law enforcement and prosecutors to investigate and prosecute these crimes. Critically important sections of the bill provide immunity from prosecution to the victims who have shared their images; allows the parents of underage victims to get assistance from our courts to have digital access to their children's communication devices; and grants eligibility for victims and their families through the Crime Victim's Compensation Program.

In May of this year, the BSSA Legislative Committee reviewed Senate Bill 263, which is identical to House Bill 531, and unanimously voted to have the BSSA support this important legislation.

I wish to thank Representatives Beth Lear and Brian Lorenz for their partnership and for bringing this important bill forward; and to this committee for your consideration. I urge you to pass HB 531 and send a strong message that this crime will not be tolerated in Ohio.

Thank you.

I'm happy to answer any questions at this time.