

Senate Health Committee

Testimony in Support of Social Media Parental Notification Act

Provided by Jennifer Markus

Dear Chairman Huffman, Vice Chair Johnson, and Ranking Member Antonio,

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 the Social Media Parental Notification Act.

Unfortunately, on October 17th, 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 rival high school, but in reality, this person was not who 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.

Sextortion is the fastest growing cybercrime in the United States, and it is defined as the practice of extorting money or sexual favors from someone by threatening to reveal evidence of their sexual activity. Our family had never heard 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. Children are using harmful apps beyond our comprehension, and the Social Media Parental Notification Act would prevent them from accessing social media apps at a young age when their brains are not fully developed. This act would hold companies accountable if a child had an app without parental consent. 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. Our son was popular, had friends, good grades, happiness, and the star of our football and baseball teams. He had no signs of depression, nor any mental health concerns. Unfortunately, the FBI has seen an increase in financial sextortion involving minors, and our son was a victim of one of many such cases.

Education is a must and there needs to be a tool that can be rolled out to middle and high school students throughout Ohio. Companies such as Cyber-Dive, based out of

Mesa, AZ, are working diligently to create an educational platform to help parents and children learn about the dangers online. Led by a former US Army Ranger, who holds dual graduate degrees in emergency management from ASU and cybercrime from Michigan St. Cyber Dive is a company that protects children from social media and the ever-changing digital landscape. If such tools had been available to us earlier, our son may have had some knowledge that what was happening was not a life sentence, and he'd be alive with us today.

The Social Media Parental Notification Act may not be perfect, but is it worth passing now, and perfecting it over the next few months. There is nothing more important than protecting our youth and their future.

Thank you for your time and the opportunity to testify about Social Media Parental Notification Act.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Markus