

HB 531 - Braden's Law
Proponent Testimony
November 20, 2024

Chairman Manning, Vice-Chair Reynolds, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee:

Thank you for allowing me to be here today and to say a few words. I'm humbled and proud to stand alongside such strong advocates like the Markus family, our legislators, and our Delaware County community.

Sextortion is a dangerous crime that preys upon the minds and bodies of our youth. The internet is at our fingertips through computers, smart phones, tablets, social media, and is able to connect us all over the world. But some connections are dangerous as there are sadly people waiting to prey upon our youth while hiding behind a screen. These online predators research our kids to learn about them by looking at online pictures, posts, social media accounts and then they use this information to lie to our kids and community to gain their trust. These predators obtain nude or sexual images from our youth through deceit and coercion. Once the predator receives that image, they quickly change their tune from faux friend to predator by demanding money, or more images, and sometimes even sexual activity from the victim. The predator also increases the pressure upon the child to comply by threatening the child with promises of releasing the image publicly, by sending the image to the child's school and friends and family.

At an alarming rate, reports of sextortion have increased drastically in just the last few years.

According to the National Center for Missing and Exploiting Children, more than 26,000 reports for financial extortion were made to the Center in 2023, which is a 149% increase in just one year. Similarly,

from October 2021 to March 2023, the FBI and Homeland Security Investigations received more than 13,000 reports of financial sextortion of minors---most of the victims were boys, and from those investigations, we know at least 20 suicides resulted because these young people were preyed upon online. And these are just the ones we know about.

But now because of the bravery of the Markus family, Ohio fights back. With the introduction and hopefully swift passage of Braden's law, prosecutors and law enforcement will be armed with another tool to protect our community and our kids—the criminal justice system. Braden's law criminalizes sextortion in the State of Ohio and provides for strong penalties for those convicted. Undoubtedly, Braden's law will save lives. It also provides a better legal framework for law enforcement and prosecutors to combat this new age predator that hides behind a screen online. It is simply overdue that the law catches up with technology and internet predators who truly are no different than the predators who exploit and assault our children face to face.

Thank you to the Markus family for taking a stand and for fighting for better justice for our kids. It's time for Ohio to join other states such as Virginia, Alabama, Georgia, and others to criminalize the crime of sextortion. We will be armed and ready and to use whatever legal means we can to squash these predators and protect our kids. We don't care if you're sitting behind a phone or a computer screen, we will find you, we will prosecute you, and we will put you in prison.

If you have been a victim of sextortion, do not go through these crises alone. There are many community advocates really to help you. You can start by simply calling, 1-800-THE-LOST.