



Representative Cecil Thomas

25th House District

House Bill 359- Sponsor Testimony

October 14th, 2025

Chair White, Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett, and members of the Children and Health Services Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to present House Bill 359, known as the Joshua Alert. I am humbled to sponsor this bill alongside my joint sponsor, Representative Gross, and to carry it forward **in honor of Joshua Al-Lateef Jr.**

Joshua Al-Lateef was a six-year-old, non-verbal boy with autism who went missing on November 20, 2024, at around 5:30 p.m. from his home in West Chester, Ohio. Despite immediate concerns, the first community-wide notification—one that pinged people’s cellphones—did not go out until more than five hours after his family had reported him missing.

Joshua’s family and community rallied—officials say nearly 300 volunteers joined the search. But tragically, more than 24 hours after he was last seen, Joshua was found in a pond near his apartment. He had drowned. The loss was heartbreaking and felt deeply—not only by those who knew him but by the broader community and state.

And his story is not unique. The petition created by Joshua’s family to get the Joshua Alert into law now has over 16,000 signatures, many of them accompanied by personal stories from parents of children with autism or individuals on the spectrum themselves.

One person shared:

“My godson, who I also am a caretaker for, is nonverbal, autistic, and highly prone to absconding... I constantly fear the worst and am worried that his elopement won't be taken quite as seriously if/when we do call for help to find him.”

If these are the thoughts and fears our constituents live with, then we—as a state—must do better. This bill is a step toward better.

Let me be clear: this legislation is not about blame. The West Chester Police Department and local responders worked diligently and compassionately under difficult circumstances. What this bill seeks to do is ensure that in future cases involving vulnerable children—especially those with autism or developmental disabilities—our systems are equipped to respond more quickly, more uniformly, and with greater clarity.

House Bill 359 strengthens Ohio's existing Statewide Emergency Alert Program by creating a new alert within that structure—the Joshua Alert.

Under this legislation:

Local law enforcement agencies—whether in cities, villages, or townships—would be required to immediately notify the statewide emergency alert system when:

- A child under 18 is missing,
- The child has been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder or another developmental disability,
- And the case meets specific activation criteria, including a credible threat and sufficient descriptive information.

This targeted alert would use the existing infrastructure of Ohio's emergency alert system, ensuring no new systems or technologies are needed. It is a practical, implementable solution that closes a dangerous gap in our current policy.

For other missing person cases that don't meet these specific criteria, the current structure remains unchanged—law enforcement still retains discretion within the first 24 hours.

As for fiscal impact:

- This bill requires no new infrastructure—it builds on the systems we already have.
- Public broadcasters and cable systems already participate voluntarily and will continue to be protected from liability under the law.

- This bill is both feasible and vital. Most importantly, it recognizes the unique vulnerabilities of children like Joshua—children who may be unable to advocate for themselves or find safety when lost or endangered. We have the tools—we simply need policy that ensures they are used when they matter most.

Joshua's story is tragic—but it should not be in vain. With this legislation, we have the opportunity to honor his memory by helping ensure that the next time a child with autism goes missing, the system responds swiftly—because every moment matters.

With the anniversary of his passing approaching in November, I urge the committee to act swiftly so this law can be in place—and so that Joshua's legacy is one of change and protection for others like him.

Thank you again, Chair White and members of the Committee, for considering this important legislation. I would now like to turn things over to my joint sponsor, Representative Gross.