

Testimony on HB 359



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Testimony before the House Children and Human Services Committee Concerning the Emergency Joshua Alert System for Missing Children

Good afternoon, Chair White, Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett, and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding HB 359. My name is Brianna Booker, and I am the policy associate for the Children's Defense Fund-Ohio. We are a statewide, multi-issue, child advocacy organization that has worked on behalf of children, young people, and families in Ohio for forty-four years. Our mission is to build community so that young people grow up with dignity, hope, and joy.

I am here to speak in support of H.B. 359 as a pivotal step in protecting children with developmental differences.

According to the Ohio Department of Education, as of 2023, approximately **289,157** students were identified as having disabilities and eligible to receive special education or similar services. Approximately 13% of those students- **37,590** were identified as having autism. According to American Academy of Pediatrics, these children are [more likely](#) to run away or go missing from their home environment subsequently increasing their risk of injury or death. In fact, [research](#) suggests that nearly 50 percent of individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities (IDD), such as autism spectrum disorder (autism) will wander at some point in their lives.

By ensuring local law enforcement agencies immediately notify the statewide emergency alert system when children with autism or developmental disabilities are reported missing, this bill protects those individuals and their families. Put simply, HB 359 ensures *all* children have adequate protection in case of emergency.

Conclusion

If even a single child goes missing, we share a profound responsibility to do everything in our power to ensure their safe return home. This responsibility is especially vital when it comes to children with developmental disabilities. As I often say, protecting and helping our children thrive isn't party-specific; it is people-specific. Today, we stand in strong support of HB 359 as an essential step toward that goal.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this important matter. I am happy to answer any questions the committee may have.