

Good Afternoon,

My name is Jim Kemmerle. I am an Investigative Agent and the Manager of the Investigative Services & Support Department at the Ashtabula County Board of Developmental Disabilities. I am also a former law enforcement officer, having retired after 28 years of service initially as a municipal police officer then as a deputy sheriff. Having served in both the law enforcement and the developmental disabilities arenas, I feel qualified to come before you today to offer my testimony in support of House Bill 144, "Keith's Law".

To demonstrate the need for Keith's Law, we need only to look back at recent events in our country. According to news reports, on April 5th, 2025, a resident in Pocatello, Idaho called 9-1-1 to report that an apparently intoxicated man armed with a large knife was chasing people in a yard. Police body worn camera footage released after the incident showed that the young man was down on the ground on his stomach in a fenced yard, still holding the knife, when the first officer arrived. The officer shouted orders to the young man to drop the knife but instead of complying, he got to his feet while still holding the knife. Adding to the confusion, police sirens, others in the yard yelling to the police officers, and more officers shouting commands to the young man can all be heard in the background. As the young man got to his feet, body worn camera footage shows him take a lunging step toward the officers. In response, the young man was struck with what news media reported to be nine bullets and a less lethal bean bag shotgun round fired from the weapons of four police officers. Officers performed first aid on the young man until EMS arrived and transported him to the hospital. In an attempt to save his life, doctors had to remove the young man's leg. Days later, after no brain activity was detected, he was removed from life support and succumbed to his injuries.

Media reports identified the young man as 17-year old Victor Perez. Victor's family shared that he was non-verbal, diagnosed with autism and cerebral palsy. On this fateful day, Victor's family was trying to take the large kitchen knife away from him when the 9-1-1 caller mistook his disability-induced staggered gait as intoxication.

Officers are regularly required to make split-second decisions in uncertain, tense, and rapidly evolving situations which others will spend days, weeks, and even years debating in the aftermath of tragedies such as this. One thing is certain. In the words of the Editorial Board of the Idaho Statesman, "Absolutely no one – not the family, not the community, not the police – wants the death of an autistic, nonverbal teenage boy who also had cerebral palsy."

The Pocatello Police Department said that they had never been called to the home before and responding officers were unaware of Victor's diagnosis. We will never know what the outcome would have been if responding officers had known more about Victor. Would they have turned off their emergency lights and sirens to avoid triggering him? Would they have designated one officer to give the command to drop the knife he held to avoid overstimulating him?

Similarly, fire departments and EMS are often deprived of potentially life-saving information when answering calls for emergencies. Life-saving information such as mobility challenges

which may impair a resident's ability to evacuate a burning home or a diabetic episode mistaken for intoxication or a mental health crisis rob fire fighters and paramedics of critical minutes during an emergency.

Keith's Law will put this information in the hands of first responders during times of crisis.

In Ashtabula County, the Board of Developmental Disabilities has partnered with our local law enforcement, fire, and EMS dispatch terminals to create a notification mechanism similar to Keith's Law which we refer to as the Emergency Registry. This registry shares critical information about a person with dispatchers and first responders. Through this registry, individuals with a developmental disability or their guardians voluntarily complete a form which records identifying information; including the individual's name, nickname, address, phone number, birth date, and physical description. The form asks the individual's diagnosis, sensory and communication needs, and the method by which the person ambulates. If the person is confined to a bed, the form asks the location of the bed within the home. The form asks about any triggers that may negatively affect the individual, any life-threatening issues or concerns, any calming methods that de-escalate the individual, and any location toward which the individual may gravitate if he or she wanders from home. The form allows for the recording of any additional information such as special instructions to enter the home and finally it records the name and phone number of emergency contacts.

Once completed, this Emergency Registry form is sent to the dispatch agency that has jurisdiction of the individual's home address. The dispatch agency enters the information from the form into their Computer-Aided Dispatch (CAD) system and it appears on-screen as an alert any time the individual's name or address is entered into a call for law enforcement, fire, or EMS service. Though Ashtabula County has five agencies with dispatch terminals, each uses the same CAD program so information is shared between them. Therefore, Emergency Registry information entered by one agency is accessible by the other dispatch agencies within the county should the individual experience an emergency away from home. Additionally, by entering the information into CAD rather than the Law Enforcement Agency Data System (LEADS), access to this important information is available to all first responders and is not limited to law enforcement officers.

The passage of Keith's Law has the potential to prevent tragedies and create positive outcomes for a vulnerable demographic. Successful implementation will allow law enforcement, fire departments, and EMS all across the state to effectively, efficiently, and safely tailor their response to calls involving individuals with all manner of disabilities. For these reasons, I strongly offer my support of House Bill 144.