

Good afternoon,

I am the mother of a 24-year-old man with profound autism, epilepsy and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). His name is Ryan. I am first and foremost a parent, then a professional. My name is Sandy Hallett- Berkey. I am the Director of the Seneca County Family and Children First Council. Many positions have led me to testify on behalf of this bill. I was a Parent Mentor in schools for 10 years and a Family liaison for 2. I also sat on the Seneca County Board of Disabilities for 14 years. I currently attend advocacy meetings with other parents at the state level with Director Kimberly Hauck at the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities. I am the author of 2 books on autism. I also co-founded a local support group for autism to help support other parents of family members with autism. By no means am I an expert on the subject of autism and individuals with disabilities but I have and continue to “walk the walk” with my son and other community members with disabilities.

I live in Tiffin Ohio. It is a small, rural community in Seneca County. I have trained first responders with how to help individuals with special needs in a crisis. I know how to handle some individuals with autism spectrum disorder when their behaviors have escalated, but I couldn’t control my own son. When his behaviors would escalate and become violent it was frustrating because he can’t speak. As a parent you can’t always predict what triggers a behavior. I have been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome due to my son’s behaviors. He is 5’10 and 275 pounds. He is very strong. When he is in “fight or flight” someone needs to de-escalate his behavior because he can be a danger to himself or others.

I have had to call 9-1-1 numerous times for my son. I don’t call to put him in jail, or to draw attention to his situation, it is to assist me in keeping my son safe during his behaviors. When I have called 911 I was in a crisis mode. You have to explain in detail to the dispatcher that your 24-year-old is either having a grand mal seizure, or he is physically assaulting you. Due to his medication reactions, his OCD and his lack of verbal communication, it makes it impossible to reason with him. It doesn’t matter who is trying to calm him. If he is agitated he will hurt anyone. It’s irrelevant if it’s a paramedic or someone in law enforcement. Which is also problematic medically, if he is in an ambulance and wakes up he may be in pain or scared but he can’t articulate his feelings. After most break downs my son is empathetic and signs an apology for his behaviors. He just can’t explain how it makes him feel and obviously his behaviors is a form of communication.

When I call 911 I believe many parents would feel the similar emotions I have. You are in a heightened emotional state. You’re calling for assistance in a panic. Explaining this trauma, and the situation in details to a dispatcher, then rehashing to officers and paramedics can retraumatize yourself and the individual you are helping- exponentially. My son isn’t purposely hurting me or others. He is trying to tell us something. It can be embarrassing and dehumanizing to my son. Sensitivity training is imperative. He can’t help his cognitive ability or his communication barrier.

This bill could be a game changer for parents and guardians like myself. It could also save lives. It can help our community professionally and personally for so many of their loved ones.

Thank you very much for your consideration of this incredibly needed to help such a vulnerable population.

Sandy Hallett Berkey