



**Representative Cecil Thomas**

25<sup>th</sup> House District

House Bill 359- Sponsor Testimony

February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2025

Chairman Johnson, Vice Chair Wilson, Ranking Member Weinstein, and esteemed members of the Senate Armed Services, Veterans Affairs, and Public Safety 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 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. But his story is not unique.

According to the Ohio Department of Education, in 2023, over 289,000 students in Ohio were identified as having disabilities, with nearly 13 percent—more than 37,000—diagnosed with autism. Children like Joshua, who have autism, are **more likely to wander away from home, putting**

**them at greater risk of injury or death.** In fact, nearly 50 percent of individuals with autism or other developmental disabilities will wander at some point in their lives. For these children, every second counts.

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 and when we do call for help to find him.”*

Another shared simply:

*“OUR CHILDREN DESERVE TO BE HERD AND ADVOCATED FOR.”*

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.

As for fiscal impact:

- This bill requires no new infrastructure. Rather 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.

**This bill passed unanimously out of the House Children and Human Services Committee and on the House floor, with 78 Representatives signed on as co-sponsors.** I urge the committee to continue that support and act swiftly so that Joshua's legacy is one of meaningful change and protection for others like him.

I would now like to turn things over to my joint sponsor, Representative Gross.