

Testimony on HB 359



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Testimony before the Senate Armed Services, Veterans Affairs, and Public Safety Committee
Concerning the Emergency Joshua Alert System for Missing Children

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on HB 359. My name is Brianna Booker, and I am the Policy Associate for the Children's Defense Fund–Ohio. For more than forty years, our organization has worked across the state to advance policies that protect children and strengthen families. Our mission is simple: to build community so that young people can grow up with dignity, hope, and joy.

I am here today to express our strong support for HB 359, which directly reflects this mission. This bill addresses a critical and urgent safety concern for children by creating a specialized alert system for when a child with a developmental disability goes missing, bringing hope and reassurance to families and communities across our state.

In 2023, [nearly](#) 289,000 Ohio students were identified as having disabilities and receiving special education services. Of those, more than 37,000 students were identified as having autism. [Research](#) consistently shows that these children face a heightened risk of wandering from safe environments. When that happens, every second matters. Yet currently, there is no dedicated system to quickly mobilize the public, and precious time can pass before an alert is issued, placing children in greater danger and leaving families in unimaginable fear. The Joshua Alert fills this critical gap. HB 359 strengthens our safety net by allowing law enforcement to immediately activate a statewide emergency alert when a child with autism or another developmental disability is reported missing. That rapid response improves coordination, raises public awareness, and increases the likelihood of a safe recovery.

This bill is more than legislation; it is a clear message to families that the state recognizes the unique risks children with developmental disabilities face and is prepared to respond with urgency and care. Enactment of this legislation is a promise

that when a child is in danger, we will act swiftly, stand with their family, and do everything in our power to bring them home safely. It is an opportunity to build a community that truly honors the dignity of every child, restores hope to families in moments of fear, and protects the joy that comes when a child is safely returned home.

For these reasons, CDF–Ohio respectfully urges you to support this important legislation. Let us be the kind of state that meets fear with action, uncertainty with hope, and ensures every child is given every possible chance to come home safely.

At this time, I welcome any questions the committee may have.