

Chair Johnson, Vice Chair Wilson, Ranking Member Weinstein, and Members of the Senate Armed Services, Veterans affairs and Public safety Committee:

With today marking Ohio's Developmental Disabilities Awareness and Advocacy Day, I am deeply honored to share my story — and my heart — with this committee. I do so not only to raise awareness about the urgent need for systems that better support our children with autism, but also to honor the life of my son.

My name is Jonisa Cook, and I am the proud mother of Joshua Al-Lateef Jr.—a radiant, loving, and joyful six-year-old boy. Joshua was diagnosed with autism at an early age. To us, his autism was not a limitation, but a superpower. He may have been nonverbal, but his smile, his energy, and his spirit communicated more than words ever could. He lit up every room he entered. His hugs had a magic that could turn even the hardest day into one filled with hope.

But on November 20th, 2024, my world was shattered.

That evening, Joshua went missing from our home. In a matter of minutes, our lives turned from routine to unimaginable crisis. My oldest son and I each called 911, telling dispatch that Joshua was only six years old, nonverbal, and autistic. We explained the urgency, pleaded for immediate help, and asked if an AMBER Alert could be issued.

We were told that Joshua did not meet the criteria.

I asked if there was any other kind of alert anything that could mobilize our neighbors, the residents of our apartment complex, or the broader community to begin looking. But there was no such alert. No immediate notification. No structured way to get help. We waited and waited. An alert wasn't issued until five to six hours later.

By then, it was too late.

Let me be clear: I do not blame the West Chester Police Department. The officers were compassionate, supportive, and did everything they could with the resources available to them. But that's exactly the problem—we don't currently have the right tools in place to respond quickly and effectively when a child with neurodevelopmental differences goes missing.

That's why I'm here today, to speak in support of House Bill 359 the Joshua Alert. Not just as a grieving mother, but as an advocate for change that could prevent other families from enduring the kind of loss mine has.

Children with autism and other neurodiverse conditions are at a significantly higher risk of wandering or eloping from safe environments. These children often don't recognize danger. They may not respond when called. They may even run from searchers or avoid eye contact. Joshua was one of these children. He didn't see the world the way many others do, and he didn't experience fear in the same way.

When a neurodiverse child goes missing, every single minute matters. We need a system that can respond immediately and effectively, one that recognizes the urgency of the situation and engages the public right away.

The Joshua Alert would fill this critical gap.

This alert system would allow law enforcement to rapidly notify the public when a child with autism or other developmental disabilities goes missing triggering a coordinated search effort tailored to the child's unique needs. It would empower communities to act fast. It would give families like mine hope in the darkest of hours.

House Bill 359 is more than a legislative proposal. It is a call to action. It is a promise that we are willing to listen, to adapt, and to protect those who are most vulnerable. It sends a powerful message: that all children—regardless of how they communicate, process the world, or move through it deserve safety, protection, and the full support of their communities.

The petition to enact the Joshua Alert into law has now reached over 16,000 signatures, with individuals across Ohio and the nation sharing their stories in support of meaningful change.

Likewise, I share my story with you not to reopen wounds, but to honor Joshua's memory and to help prevent this tragedy from repeating itself. Joshua's life was filled with love and light. And though he is no longer physically with us, I believe that his legacy can live on through this bill—through the lives it saves and the families it supports.

Thank you for your time, your service, and your commitment to Ohio's children. This bill received unanimous, bipartisan support in the Ohio House, and I urge you, with all my heart, to support House Bill 359 with that same spirit so we can make the Joshua Alert a reality.

With deepest gratitude,

Jonisa Cook