

Proponent Testimony on House Bill 359
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Chairman Johnson, Vice Chair Wilson, Ranking Member Weinstein, and members of the Senate Armed Services, Veterans Affairs and Public Safety Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of House Bill 359, otherwise known as “Joshua’s Law.”

Ohio’s 88 county boards were founded by families in 1967 to ensure that those with intellectual and developmental disabilities have access to the services and supports they need to live safe, healthy, and independent lives in their communities. Today, county boards continue that mission through early intervention services, service and support administration, crisis response and connections to home-and-community based services for more than 117,000 Ohioans and their families.

House Bill 359 strengthens county boards’ abilities to maintain the health and safety of the individuals we serve by updating the current Statewide Emergency Alert Program to ensure that a Missing Persons Alert is issued immediately when a child with autism spectrum disorder or a developmental disability is reported missing. For children with I/DD, particularly those with autism, elopement is a well-documented safety concern. These children may be nonverbal and unable to identify themselves and minutes, sometimes seconds, can mean the difference in these dangerous situations.

County boards work regularly with families to develop safety plans and respond to crisis situations. When a child goes missing, county board staff often assist families, coordinate with local law enforcement, and utilize local community networks to spread awareness in finding the child quickly. Because county boards maintain ongoing relationships with families and are aware of a child’s communication and behavioral needs, their staff can often serve as important assets when locating a child.

By removing the regular 24-hour waiting period when reporting a person missing, House Bill 359 provides families, first responders, and communities with one more tool in a time of crisis. An expedited alert can increase public awareness in real time, expand the number of people looking for the child and can improve cross-agency coordination. This can be especially helpful in rural areas where resources may be more limited. For county boards, this bill helps enhance crisis response efforts and continues to strengthen partnerships with emergency management agencies.

Joshua’s Law builds on existing emergency alert structures to better protect one of Ohio’s vulnerable populations. This bill helps recognize that children with developmental disabilities face unique challenges and works to make sure their communities are equipped with safety systems that can respond accordingly.

County boards support House Bill 359 because it aligns with our core responsibilities of keeping people safe and supporting families in life’s critical moments. This bill is an important step in ensuring all children with developmental disabilities are safe, happy and healthy.

Thank you to the sponsors for the bill for introducing this concept and the members of this committee for discussing this important legislation. I am happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.