

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

Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 359, Joshua's Alert. This bill would help ensure that when a child with disabilities goes missing, law enforcement can issue faster notifications to a targeted area, getting vital information out quickly to the people most likely to help.

My name is Nick Tuell, we live in Lebanon, Ohio and I come before you as an activist, a former legislative aide, and most importantly, the father of an amazing 6-year-old boy named Jackson. Like Joshua, Jackson is autistic, non-speaking, and requires support in most educational and social settings. When Joshua went missing, my family joined the search. We hoped our experience with our son might help because we know how uniquely challenging some situations are for autistic children. Many autistic children may not respond to their names, can be sensitive to lights and sounds, and sometimes may even hide from those trying to help. The reality is simple: when a child with disabilities goes missing, every second counts, and every tool matters.

According to the National Autism Association, children like Joshua and Jackson are 160 times more likely to go missing and drown than their neurotypical peers. On average, seven children drown each month in the United States. That's why advocates emphasize, "search water first" the moment an autistic child is missing. While researchers continue to study why autistic children are drawn to water, we know that many seek its calming effect. What we don't need more studies to know is this: when your child is missing, you want law enforcement to have every resource available and Joshua's Alert provides just that. Other states are already moving forward. Kentucky has implemented Ian's Alert, and Pennsylvania recently introduced Purple Alert. Ohio should not be left behind. Importantly, the Legislative Service Commission's fiscal note makes it clear: HB 359 costs \$0, adds only a single step for law enforcement, and has the potential to save lives.

I respectfully urge this committee to pass Joshua's Alert swiftly and to include an emergency clause, so that Joshua's Alert is active when the next child with disabilities goes missing, officers and families have the tools they need right away.

In closing, I want to recognize Joshua's mother, Jonisa Cook, whose courage and persistence have turned unimaginable tragedy into a mission to protect other children. From fundraising for swim lessons to serving on the Governor's Missing Persons Working Group, her advocacy is changing lives and today, you have the power to help her finish this fight. Thank you, Chair Johnson, Vice Chair Wilson, and Ranking Member Weinstein, for your time and consideration.