
**Shawn Henry, Executive Director, OCALI
Reginald Fields, Chair, OCALI Advisory Board**

**House Bill 359 Proponent Testimony before Ohio Senate Armed Forces, Veterans Affairs and Public Safety
Committee
Wednesday, March 4, 2026**

Chairman Johnson, Vice Chair Wilson, Ranking Member Weinstein, and members of the Senate Armed Forces, Veterans Affairs and Public Safety Committee, my name is Shawn Henry, and I am the Executive Director of OCALI, and I am joined today by the chair of OCALI's advisory board, Reginald Fields.

OCALI was created through Statute (ORC 3323.31) in 2004 to administer programs and coordinate services for infants, children, and adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and other disabilities. Since its inception, OCALI has served as Ohio's statewide clearinghouse for information, professional development, and technical assistance related to autism and low-incidence disabilities. Throughout OCALI's longstanding history, extensive partnerships with state agencies, and the expertise of its highly qualified staff, OCALI has become a national leader in providing high-quality information, professional development, and technical assistance to ensure families, educators, service providers, and the community, including first responders, are equipped to support Ohioans with autism and other disabilities across their lifespan.

We are providing our written testimony to express support for HB 359, The Joshua Alert, legislation that fills a critical gap in Ohio's emergency response for missing children with developmental disabilities.

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects communication, social interaction, and behavior. It is a spectrum because it appears in so many ways and can present differently from person to person. One of the most urgent safety concerns associated with autism is wandering or "elopement." Research indicates that nearly half of the children and youth with autism have been reported to wander, and among those, one in four goes missing long enough to cause significant concern. (Anderson, et al., 2012; T-Pederson, et al., 2021)

These behaviors often begin early and include moving to another area unnoticed, bolting when upset, or seeking out quiet places, such as water sources. Importantly, wandering is often a form of communication as an autistic person may be attempting to reach something of interest or escape something overwhelming. These incidents increase when the child or youth is under stress or struggling to regulate emotions.

National data shows that nearly one-third of ASD wandering cases result in death or require medical attention. Children under the age of five are at the highest risk, with nearly 60% of cases ending in death. (NAA, 2017; Wiggins, et al., 2020) These devastating outcomes underscore the urgent importance of a rapid, informed response.

Every minute matters when a child with a developmental disability goes missing, as stated by the mother of Joshua Al-Lateef Jr, whose story inspired this legislation. “Every single minute matters. We need a system that can respond immediately... The Joshua Alert would fill this critical gap.”

First responders play a vital role in keeping our communities safe. They are often the first to be called when a child or youth with autism goes missing, and they need timely information, family contacts, and a plan to respond safely and sensitively. HB 359 directly addresses this need. The bill clarifies that when a missing child or youth has autism or another developmental disability, law enforcement must immediately notify the statewide emergency alert system once essential information is verified. The Joshua Alert utilizes Ohio’s existing alert system to activate a coordinated, statewide response reaching the public quickly across all channels. This rapid, targeted approach ensures that responders and the public are informed early, reducing trauma, improving trust between families and emergency services, and significantly increasing the likelihood of a safe recovery.

Children and youth with autism often do not respond to offers of help, and in some cases cannot respond the way other children and youth can. For this reason, having all the information in a swift and timely manner is all the more critical to ensuring their safety and wellbeing.

As an organization dedicated to improving outcomes for individuals with disabilities, OCALI supports HB 359. We urge the committee to pass HB 359 and help ensure that when a child or youth with autism or a developmental disability goes missing, Ohio responds with urgency, coordination, and the understanding that these children and families deserve.

Thank you for your time and for your commitment to protecting vulnerable members of our community.