

Proponent Testimony on House Bill 321
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Chairman Ghanbari, Vice Chair Plummer, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the House Homeland Security Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of House Bill 321, also known as "Keith's Law."

By establishing a voluntary, statewide special needs registry for use by first responders when supporting people with developmental disabilities, mental health challenges, and specialized medical care needs during emergency situations, House Bill 321 helps both first responders and people with developmental disabilities stay safe in crisis situations.

Ohio's 88 county boards of developmental disabilities are no stranger to these situations, as our trained professional staff are often called upon to help support first responders when emergencies arise and the individuals involved are known to receive or otherwise be affiliated with county board services.

Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Across many local jurisdictions, county boards support hundreds, if not thousands of individuals, not all of whom are known to law enforcement and first responder agencies. In addition, while some local and county agencies have created special needs registries or databases like the one proposed by House Bill 321, their effectiveness ends once a person leaves their home county.

Many normal and non-threatening behaviors exhibited by some people with certain developmental disabilities can be misinterpreted by first responders, particularly when emotions are running high and circumstances are volatile. If these behaviors are misinterpreted as dangerous or threatening, the impact of this misunderstanding can be disastrous—and sometimes, even fatal.

But these communication and behavioral challenges are not the only concern that this registry would address. When time is of the essence to keep people safe—such as when there is a fire and someone needs help to exit safely, when a person who is nonverbal is reported missing, or when there is a natural disaster and someone uses life sustaining medical equipment—having critical information in a centrally accessible location can be the difference between life and death.

House Bill 321 addresses this gap by proposing the creation of a comprehensive, voluntary statewide registry where individuals or their families can provide crucial information about their developmental, medical, and mental health circumstances.

The significance of this registry cannot be overstated. It empowers first responders by providing them with vital information that allows them to approach emergency situations with a deeper understanding of the specific needs of those involved. Rather than relying on guesswork or assumptions, responders will have access to critical details, preventing misunderstandings and ensuring appropriate care is delivered promptly.

In addition, the voluntary nature of this registry is a testament to its inclusivity and respect for personal choice. It accommodates a wide range of supports, from behavioral challenges and adaptive communication needs to mobility assistance and specialized medical requirements.

As you all are undoubtedly aware, “Keith’s Law” is named after Keith Jesse, a K-9 Search Specialist who helps first responders across Ohio locate people with special needs who have gone missing. Keith’s lived experience as the father of a son with autism and a professional first response partner helps him better understand the many communication challenges that sometimes occur between first responders and people with developmental disabilities who are experiencing a crisis.

Keith's tireless efforts, along with those of Representatives Click and Lorenz, exemplify a commitment to improving the lives of thousands across Ohio. This legislation is not just about bridging a gap; it's about extending empathy, understanding, and safety to those who need it most in times of crisis.

We applaud Keith for his tireless advocacy, and hope that the committee will favorably report this bill for the full consideration of your colleagues. By advancing this legislation, you're championing a cause that ensures a more inclusive and safer environment for all Ohioans.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.