



OHIO

Missing Persons Working Group

REPORT

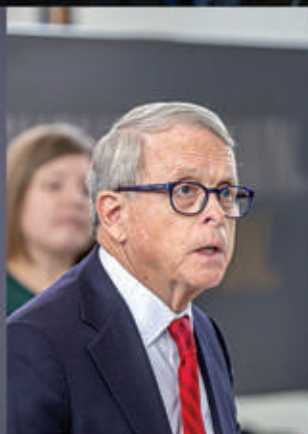
May 2025

An examination of missing persons investigations and recommendations for improvement.

The Ohio State Highway Patrol Aviation Unit demonstrates high-altitude search and rescue technology.

"Every life is valuable, which is why it's important to take all missing persons cases seriously. The ultimate goal is to bring more missing people home safely."

— Mike DeWine, Governor of Ohio

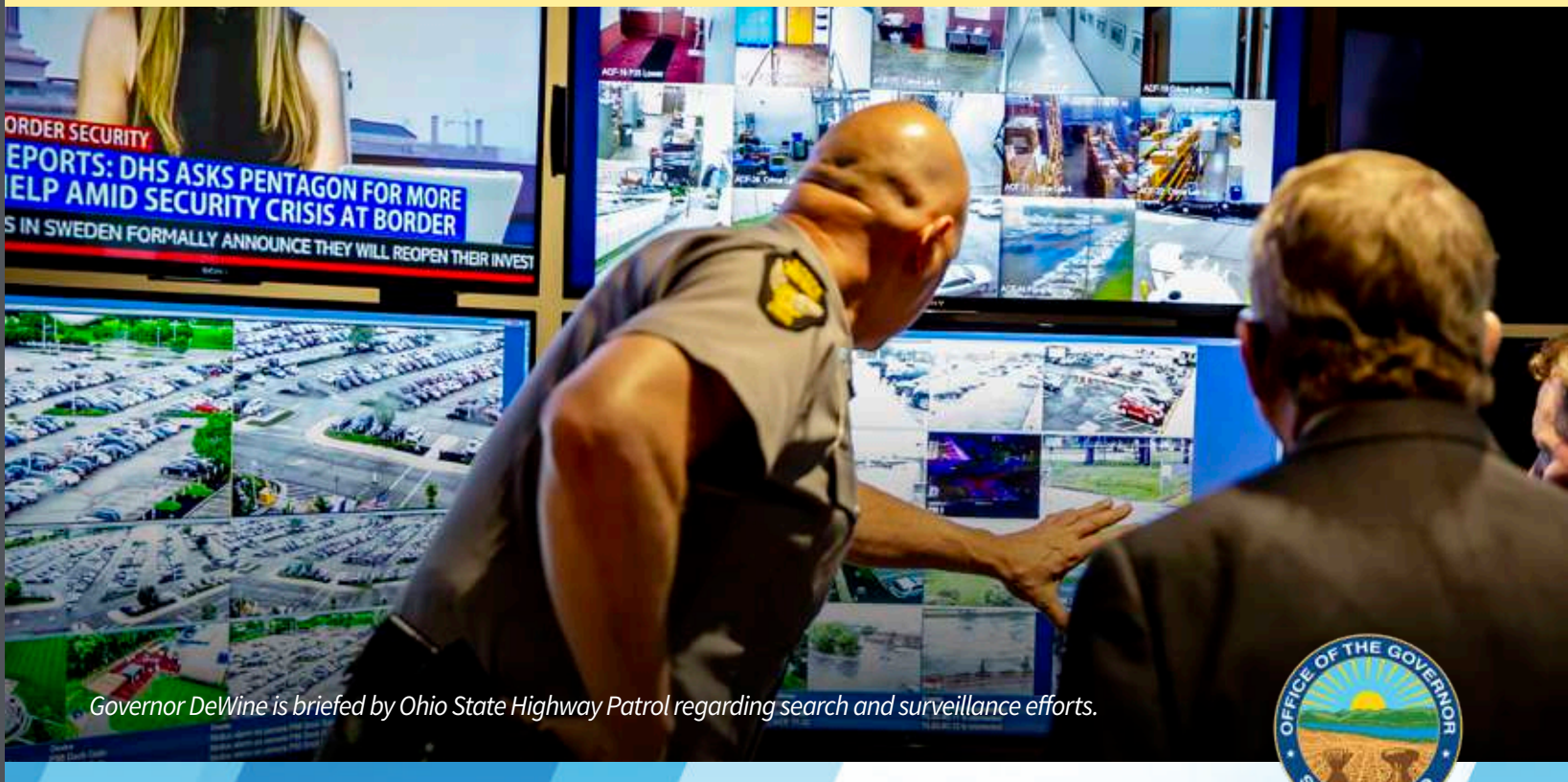


MIKE DEWINE
GOVERNOR OF OHIO



**Department of
Public Safety**

Letter from the Governor



Governor DeWine is briefed by Ohio State Highway Patrol regarding search and surveillance efforts.



Dear Fellow Ohioans,

Protecting our citizens and ensuring Ohio is a safe place to live, work, and raise a family will always be my top priority.

However, thousands of children and adults continue to be reported missing each year. Although most are located quickly, some simply vanish, leaving anguished families behind and adding to the growing caseload of law enforcement investigators.

In January of this year, I created the Ohio Missing Persons Working Group to determine how Ohio can better support families with missing loved ones and officers who spend their days looking for those who have disappeared. I asked members to carefully examine the challenges associated with investigating and resolving missing persons cases and tasked them with developing recommendations on how Ohio can do more to return missing children and adults to their loved ones as quickly as possible.

I am grateful to each member of the Ohio Missing Persons Working Group for dedicating their time and sharing their perspectives on the complexities of missing persons cases. I am equally grateful to those who testified before the group.

When implemented, I believe the recommendations outlined in this report will positively impact relatives and investigators searching for missing people, leading to more successful investigations and reunited families.



Very Respectfully Yours,

Mike DeWine
Governor

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Missing Persons Working Group Members



The Missing Persons Working Group is led by Ohio Department of Public Safety Director Andy Wilson. Other working group members include:

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- Jeff Allen**, Chief Deputy, Mahoning County Sheriff’s Office
- Kevin Callahan**, Detective, Cleveland Division of Police
- Kelli Cary**, State Anti-Trafficking Director, Office of Criminal Justice Services
- Matt Champlin**, Sheriff, Gallia County Sheriff’s Office
- Aimee Chapman**, Sister of Andrew Chapman
- Vince Ciola**, Bureau Chief, Ohio Department of Children and Youth
- Jonisa Cook**, Mother of Joshua Al-Lateef Jr.
- Sylvia Colon**, Co-founder, Cleveland Family Center for Missing Children and Adults
- Gerald Ehrtam**, Sergeant, Columbus Division of Police
- Pete Elliot**, U.S. Marshal, Northern District of Ohio
- Aaron Haslam**, Prosecutor, Adams County Prosecutor’s Office
- Rebecca Kincaid**, Detective, Toledo Police Department
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- Lydia Smith Lockwood**, Ph.D., Assistant Principal, Upper Arlington High School
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Ohio Department of Public Safety Staff Acknowledgments

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Governor’s Office Staff Acknowledgements

- Jill Del Greco**, Assistant Director of Media Relations
- Lauren Niner**, Communications Advisor

Special Thanks:

- Alex Armitage**, Ohio Department of Public Safety Chief Legal Counsel
- Nancy Baer**, sister of Judy Martins
- Susan Brownknight**, CEO, Living Arrangements for the Developmentally Disabled
- Lt. Dave Buttler**, Delaware County Child Abduction Response Team
- Tia Cokes**, Ohio Mobile Response and Stabilization Services
- Joe Courtesis**, retired NYPD detective (law enforcement consultant)
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- Tom Gerber**, 988 Planning Manager, Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services
- Sheriff Terry Grice**, Medina County
- Jane Hanlin**, Jefferson County Prosecutor
- Danae King**, The Columbus Dispatch
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- Charlie Norman**, Registrar, Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles
- Shelly Pergram**, Detective, Springfield Division of Police (ret.)
- Vincent Piccoli**, Deputy U.S. Marshal, U.S. Marshals Service
- Jordan Smith**, National Center for Missing and Exploited Children
- Jennifer Stokes**, Delaware County Child Abduction Response Team (CART)
- Linda Summers**, grandmother of Ashley Summers
- Sgt. Shawn Walters**, Ohio State Highway Patrol Aviation Unit
- Aliya Ward**, sister of Amanda Ward-Romine

Letter from the Public Safety Director



Dear Fellow Ohioans,

In the months since Governor DeWine created the Missing Persons Working Group, members have taken a detailed approach to examine how missing persons cases are investigated in Ohio.

The working group was composed of members who brought unique personal and professional experience to the table. From family members of missing persons and law enforcement personnel to mental health experts and advocates, members of the working group engaged in honest conversations about missing persons from all angles of the complex issue.

The testimony from family members of missing persons was particularly impactful, and the working group acknowledges the grief, loss, and trauma impacting relatives of missing loved ones. The pain and frustration expressed to the working group were real and readily apparent. The efforts of this working group aim to bring some level of relief, justice, or closure to those across the state who have experienced the loss associated with a missing family member.

The recommendations outlined in this report serve as a starting point to improve Ohio’s response when handling

missing persons cases, support families with missing loved ones, and bolster law enforcement agencies with needed resources to provide the best possible results for missing adults and children.

I am grateful to the members of the working group for their time and dedication to this important issue. With your guidance and insight, Ohio will be better positioned to address missing persons cases.

On behalf of all working group members, I want to thank the Governor for the opportunity to examine this issue to help prevent disappearances and return those who are missing home.



Sincerely,

Andy Wilson
Director, Ohio Department of
Public Safety

Executive Summary and Subject Matter Experts

According to the Ohio Attorney General’s Office, 21,342 missing persons reports were documented in 2024, including 16,404 reports of missing children. While local law enforcement reported that 96.5% of these children, 15,834, were recovered safely, the number of children who have not been located over the years continues to grow. Currently, the Ohio Attorney General’s Missing Persons Database lists more than 800 missing children, including some who haven’t been seen for decades. The database also lists approximately 350 missing adults.

In January 2025, Governor Mike DeWine convened the Missing Persons Working Group to examine how missing persons cases are investigated and offer recommendations for improvement. The working group was charged with reviewing Ohio’s resources and its response to adult and juvenile missing persons cases to discuss the needs of law enforcement, identify necessary new legislation, and determine how to better serve families with missing loved ones.

The working group, which included law enforcement, family members of missing persons, advocacy organizations, and others, convened six times through the end of April. This report stems from the meetings and subject matter discussed before the working group.

Recordings can be found online at publicsafety.ohio.gov with accompanying PowerPoint presentations.

Members of the working group gathered valuable information from law enforcement, family members of missing individuals, and leaders representing vulnerable populations. They also heard from various subject matter experts who outlined the established state and national resources that have proven to be valuable, effective tools that aid in locating missing individuals:





Ohio Attorney General's Bureau of Criminal Investigation

The Ohio Attorney General's Bureau of Criminal Investigation (BCI) houses the state's missing persons unit and is available to assist local law enforcement agencies at no cost upon request. This unit employs specialized investigators and analysts who help with DNA and forensic testing, cold case investigation, genealogy services, analytical research, and more.

Amber Alert Advisory Committee

Ohio's Amber Alert Advisory Committee is comprised of multiple agencies and individuals responsible for coordinating statewide emergency alert programs including those listed below:

AMBER Alerts are issued in cases of confirmed child abductions when the general public's help may make a life-or-death difference in the safe recovery of the abducted child. As outlined in Ohio Revised Code (ORC) 5502.52, law enforcement can issue an AMBER Alert if they have confirmed an abduction has occurred and:

- The abducted child is under eighteen years of age.
- The abduction poses a credible threat of immediate danger of serious bodily harm or death to a child.
- The child is not a runaway and has not been abducted as a result of a child custody dispute, unless the dispute poses a credible threat of immediate danger of serious bodily harm or death to the child.
- There is sufficient descriptive information about the child, the abductor, and the circumstances surrounding the abduction to indicate that activation of the alert will help locate the child.

Endangered Missing Child Alerts are issued by law enforcement when a missing child is considered at risk, but the case does not meet the criteria for an AMBER Alert. This alert provides a way to enlist the public's help in locating an endangered missing child, without desensitizing the media and public to AMBER Alerts.

BCI has developed the following criteria to determine if an Endangered Missing Child Alert should be issued:

- The child is under 18 years of age.
- Law enforcement confirms the child is missing, such as lost, non-witnessed/non-confirmed abduction or the child's whereabouts are unknown.
- Law enforcement believes the missing circumstances pose a credible threat of serious bodily harm or death to the child.
- There is sufficient descriptive information about the child and the circumstances surrounding the disappearance that the alert activation will help locate the child.

Endangered Missing Adult Alerts are issued to help locate high-risk missing adults. As outlined in ORC 5502.522, the missing adult must be 65 years old or older, and/or have a mental impairment, and/or have autism spectrum disorder or another developmental disability. The disappearance must also pose a risk of serious bodily harm or death, and there must be sufficient descriptive information about the individual and the circumstances surrounding the individual's disappearance to indicate that activation of the alert will help locate the individual.



Ohio State Highway Patrol Aviation Unit

The Ohio State Highway Patrol (OSHP) Aviation Unit is available to support local law enforcement agencies in missing persons cases at no cost. Once local authorities activate a search and rescue operation, OSHP can assist by flying over the area and using downlink technology to livestream aerial video to investigators on the ground.

Child Abduction Response Teams

Child Abduction Response Teams (CARTs) are multi-jurisdictional teams of public safety agents, law enforcement, K9 units, and other individuals from various agencies who rapidly respond in the case of an abduction or high-risk missing person. CARTs use science-based, strategic planning, and lost-person behavioral data to inform their response, especially when dealing with missing persons who have developmental disabilities, dementia, or Alzheimer's disease.



U.S. Marshals Service

In 2023, the U.S. Marshals Service created a Missing Child Unit as part of a multi-disciplinary approach to locate and recover high-risk missing children. The U.S. Marshals Service provides missing children case oversight and management, conducts training, coordinates operations, and assists with complex investigations both nationally and internationally.

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC)

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children is a private, non-profit organization that works to find missing children, reduce child sexual exploitation, and prevent child victimization. NCMEC works with families, victims, private industry, law enforcement, and the public to prevent child abductions, recover missing children, and provide services to deter and combat child sexual exploitation.



National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs)

NamUs is the only national repository for missing, unidentified, and unclaimed persons cases. The program provides a singular resource hub for law enforcement, medical examiners, coroners, and investigating professionals. It is the only national database for missing, unidentified, and unclaimed persons that allows limited access to the public, empowering family members to take a more proactive role in the search for their missing loved ones.

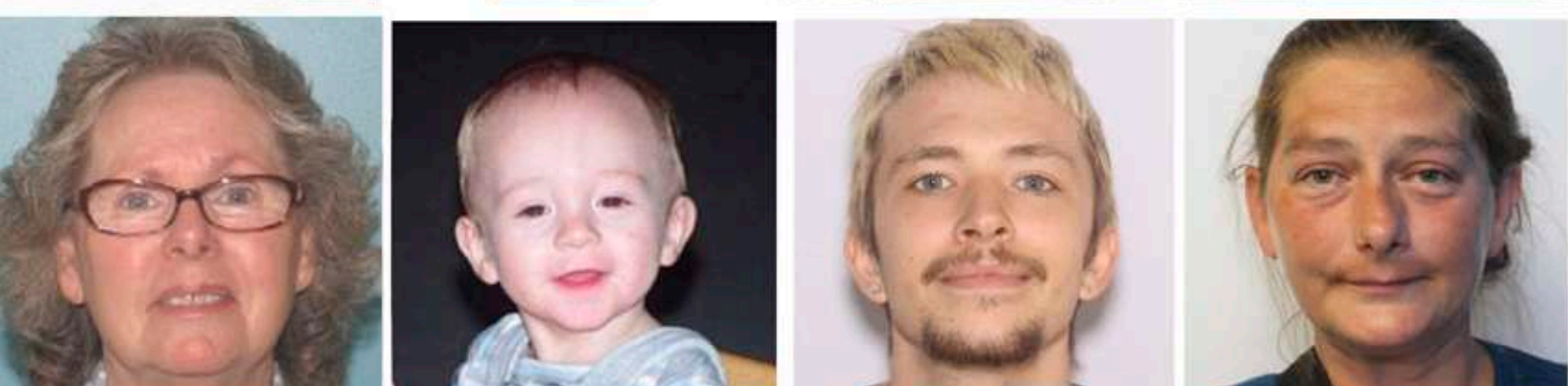
National Criminal Information Center (NCIC)

NCIC is a computerized database of missing persons and criminal investigative information. This tool is designed for rapid information sharing between criminal justice agencies nationwide.

Ohio Law Enforcement Automated Data System (LEADS)

LEADS is a statewide computerized network that provides data and communications for criminal justice agencies within the state of Ohio. LEADS is administered by the Ohio State Highway Patrol and interfaces with NCIC.

Members of the Ohio Missing Persons Working Group also identified several areas of improvement that form the basis of this report. Eighteen recommendations primarily focus on the need for better information-sharing practices, enhanced law enforcement training and public education, improved communication between law enforcement and relatives of missing persons, and better support for youth who are repeatedly reported missing from their homes or congregate care settings.



Ohio Missing Persons Working Group Recommendations

- 1** The Ohio General Assembly should codify criteria for Ohio's Endangered Missing Child Alert.
- 2** The Ohio State Highway Patrol should work with BCI to create an automatic process to notify necessary law enforcement agencies of Endangered Missing Child Alerts.
- 3** The U.S. Department of Justice should expedite work to connect NCIC to the NamUs database as required by the federal Help Find the Missing Act, otherwise known as Billy's Law.
- 4** The Ohio General Assembly should create legislation authorizing law enforcement and county prosecutors to seek search warrants to gather information and records that may help them locate a high-risk missing person.
- 5** The Ohio General Assembly should create legislation to increase the criminal penalty for suspects who interfere with custody by removing a child or children out of the state or to a foreign nation.
- 6** The Ohio General Assembly should mandate that interference with custody arrest warrants be entered into LEADS and NCIC with a nationwide pickup radius.
- 7** The Ohio Office of Criminal Justice Services should expand its Ohio Prisoner Extradition Reimbursement Program to allow grant funding to be used to pay law enforcement for costs associated with returning interference with custody suspects to Ohio.
- 8** The Ohio General Assembly should create legislation requiring local law enforcement agencies to digitize unresolved missing persons reports prior to the destruction of paper files. BCI should also create a digital repository to store missing persons' case records from local law enforcement agencies.
- 9** The Ohio Peace Officer Training Academy within the Ohio Attorney General's Office should develop advanced training for new missing persons investigators and law enforcement dispatchers.
- 10** The Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services and the Ohio Department of Health should develop a model policy outlining information healthcare providers are legally permitted to share with law enforcement officers investigating missing persons cases. These agencies should also develop a continued professional training course to further educate the healthcare industry on law enforcement exemptions to the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act.
- 11** The Ohio Attorney General's Office should maintain a central repository of resources for law enforcement and families of missing persons.
- 12** The Ohio Attorney General's Office and Ohio Department of Public Safety should partner to create educational resources outlining how and when to file a missing persons report.
- 13** BCI should establish an annual conference for law enforcement and families with missing loved ones to collaborate, share best practices, and raise awareness about missing persons cases in Ohio.
- 14** BCI should establish a confidential forum for law enforcement and intelligence analysts conducting missing persons investigations to discuss techniques, establish cross-jurisdiction collaboration, and perform case reviews.
- 15** The Ohio Collaborative Community-Police Advisory Board should review and revise its missing persons law enforcement standard and model policy in accordance with this working group's recommendations. The revisions should include a best practices guide, developed in partnership with BCI, for working with family members of missing persons.
- 16** The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement should implement a process to notify state refugee coordinators within the Ohio Department of Job & Family Services when an unaccompanied minor is placed in Ohio.
- 17** The Ohio School Safety Center and Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles should work together to increase awareness of the ID R Kids youth identification card program.
- 18** The Ohio Department of Children and Youth, Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation, and Ohio Office of Criminal Justice Services should work with local law enforcement to develop a pilot program that utilizes advocates to support at-risk youth who regularly leave their homes or group home settings.

Photos sourced from: <https://www.ohioattorneygeneral.gov/Law-Enforcement/Local-Law-Enforcement/Ohio-Missing-Persons>

1 The Ohio General Assembly should codify criteria for Ohio’s Endangered Missing Child Alert.

The Endangered Missing Child Alert was created for cases in which a child is considered at risk if not found quickly but the circumstances of the disappearance do not meet the statutory mandates for an AMBER Alert. BCI’s Missing Persons Unit works with local law enforcement to issue Endangered Missing Child Alerts through a process similar to that of Ohio’s Endangered Missing Adult Alert ¹, however, the use of Endangered Missing Child Alerts by law enforcement is not codified in the Ohio Revised Code and is therefore not mandated by law.

The Ohio Missing Persons Working Group recommends that the Ohio General Assembly codify the criteria for issuing an Endangered Missing Child Alert into the Ohio Revised Code. These criteria should mirror standards previously developed by BCI. Mandating that Endangered Missing Persons Alerts are issued in specific, limited situations will ensure that these alerts are uniformly issued across the state.

2 The Ohio State Highway Patrol (OSHP) should work with BCI to create an automatic process to notify necessary law enforcement agencies of Endangered Missing Child Alerts.

During their discussions, working group members learned that the process to activate an Endangered Missing Child Alert is not automated, in contrast to similar alerts issued in Ohio. For an AMBER Alert or Endangered Missing Adult Alert to be activated, law enforcement must enter the missing person’s information into LEADS, which automatically triggers a notification to necessary law enforcement partners. However, when a youth who could be classified as an endangered missing child is reported missing, local law enforcement must call BCI to request an Endangered Missing Child Alert ².

According to BCI, law enforcement is generally accustomed to the automatic notification process of other alerts and oftentimes do not remember to contact the state. As a result, many Endangered Missing Child Alerts are either issued late or not at all.

Given that automatic notification systems already exist for AMBER Alerts and Endangered Missing Adult Alerts, the Ohio Missing Persons Working Group recommends that OSHP work with BCI to create a similar process for Endangered Missing Child Alerts. This system should automatically generate in-state messages to the same entities that are notified of AMBER Alerts and Endangered Missing Adult Alerts. Automating this process will make it easier for law enforcement to issue the alert and increase the chance that the child is quickly located.

3 The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) should expedite work to connect NCIC to the NamUs database as required by the federal Help Find the Missing Act, otherwise known as Billy’s Law.

In 2022, President Joe Biden signed Billy’s Law, requiring the DOJ to connect the NamUs and NCIC databases to allow the automatic transfer of case information between systems ³. The purpose of the law is to ensure that each database has comprehensive information on missing persons/unidentified remains and to eliminate the need for law enforcement to separately enter case information into each database. Working group members discussed the practical effectiveness of this law and found no evidence that the automatic transfer of cases between NCIC and NamUs is occurring, and as a result, law enforcement must still separately input case details into each database⁴.

To support the comprehensive sharing of information across databases and jurisdictions, the Ohio Missing Persons Working Group recommends that the DOJ’s new administration put immediate focus on the enforcement of Billy’s Law.

The working group also encourages Governor DeWine to write a letter to U.S. Attorney General Pam Bondi to bring this issue to her attention. Honoring the intent of Billy’s Law will create a seamless process to share information across jurisdictions and enhance the effectiveness of missing person investigations.

4 The Ohio General Assembly should create legislation authorizing law enforcement and county prosecutors to seek search warrants to gather information and records that may help them locate a high-risk missing person.

The Missing Persons Working Group heard from family members of missing individuals who believe the chances of finding their loved ones could have drastically improved if law enforcement had access to the missing person’s personal records, such as phone and social media records, in the early stages of the investigation ⁵.

For law enforcement to access personal records, they must obtain a search warrant, but in most cases, judges cannot issue a warrant unless there is probable cause that a crime has been committed ⁶. Therefore, in cases with no immediate evidence of a criminal act or foul play, law enforcement has no avenue to obtain records that could hold clues to the person’s whereabouts.

Members of the working group acknowledge that adults have the right to disappear and not be found, but in cases where the circumstances indicate a missing person may be in imminent danger, law enforcement should be able

to pursue a warrant for records that may assist in locating the individual. The Missing Persons Working Group recommends that the Ohio General Assembly create legislation authorizing law enforcement and county prosecutors to request search warrants to aid in locating high-risk missing persons. This legislation should define the criteria for an individual to be considered high-risk and should include statutory authorization for courts to issue such search warrants. Giving law enforcement the opportunity to obtain administrative search warrants will make a tremendous impact in circumstances where high-risk individuals disappear without a trace.

5 The Ohio General Assembly should create legislation to increase the criminal penalty for suspects who interfere with custody by removing a child or children out of the state or to a foreign nation.

Members of the working group found that the current law in Ohio addressing interference with custody does not ⁷ effectively prevent the crime. When a suspect, usually a parent, unlawfully takes a child to live in another state or country, the crime is a fifth-degree felony, the lowest felony offense level. Furthermore, because the crime of interference with custody is also classified as a nonviolent offense, the suspect must be sentenced to probation, absent any other aggravating factors ⁸. Only requiring probation for those found guilty of unlawfully taking a child from home demeans the seriousness of the offense. Interference with custody is a serious crime and should be treated as such. The Ohio Missing Persons Working Group recommends that the Ohio General Assembly create legislation to increase the penalties for interference with custody as follows:

- When the child is taken across state lines: F4, 18 months in prison
- When the child is taken outside of the United States: F2, 8 years in prison

By increasing these penalties, members of the working group believe the law will serve as a better deterrent to prevent interference with custody cases and allow the criminal justice system to ensure that those who commit the offense face reasonable consequences.

6 The Ohio General Assembly should mandate that interference with custody arrest warrants be entered into LEADS and NCIC with a nationwide pickup radius.

The anguish felt by families whose younger loved ones have been unlawfully taken out of the state or country is incomprehensible. Adding to that pain is the difficulty they face when trying to bring a child back home, even in cases where the child’s location is known.

While various barriers can stand in the way of returning a child to their custodial parent, working group members were concerned to learn that it is the blanket policy of many law enforcement agencies to set an in-state pickup radius when entering warrants into LEADS and NCIC for low-level, non-violent offenses, such as interference with custody ⁹. Therefore, if a suspect wanted for this charge is located in another state, law enforcement there would not arrest the individual on Ohio’s warrant. This practice effectively nullifies warrants for those who unlawfully interfere with custody by moving a child out of Ohio.

The Ohio Missing Persons Working Group recommends that the Ohio General Assembly mandate that interference with custody arrest warrants be entered into LEADS and NCIC with a nationwide pickup radius. Members of the working group do not believe that law enforcement agencies are maliciously trying to prevent the reunification of families; rather, this is an example of a discretionary policy that is far too broad. When children have been victimized, Ohio law enforcement agencies must be willing to travel wherever it takes to return them to their rightful family members.

7 The Ohio Office of Criminal Justice Services should expand its Ohio Prisoner Extradition Reimbursement Program to allow grant funding to be used to pay law enforcement for costs associated with returning interference with custody suspects to Ohio.

Because the implementation of recommendations five and six will undoubtedly increase expenses and workload for local law enforcement agencies, working group members agree that the state should financially support agencies for costs incurred to return interference with custody suspects to Ohio.

In 2019, on the recommendation of the Ohio Governor’s Warrant Task Force, Governor DeWine created the Ohio Prisoner Extradition Reimbursement Program within the Ohio Office of Criminal Justice Services (OCJS) ¹⁰. This program reimburses law enforcement agencies for the cost of bringing individuals charged with felony offenses of violence back to Ohio. The Ohio Missing Persons Working Group recommends that OCJS expand this program to include interference with custody as a charge that qualifies for reimbursement.

Over the past six years, OCJS has reimbursed local law enforcement nearly \$692,000 to return 197 dangerous, wanted suspects to Ohio who may not otherwise have been returned to face charges if not for these funds. This demonstrates the effectiveness of this program and its potential to make a difference in interference with custody cases.



- 8 The Ohio General Assembly should create legislation requiring local law enforcement agencies to digitize unresolved missing persons reports prior to the destruction of paper files. BCI should also create a digital repository to store missing persons' case records from local law enforcement agencies.**

Today's advancements in science and technology are allowing law enforcement to look at cold cases, including decades-old missing persons investigations, through a new lens. Sadly, working group members heard from people with long-term missing loved ones who could not obtain old case records due to files being destroyed or lost to time¹¹.

Members of the working group believe that investigative files for unresolved missing persons cases must be preserved, should the need arise to reexamine the investigation. **The Ohio Missing Persons Working Group recommends that the Ohio General Assembly create legislation requiring local law enforcement to digitize missing persons' paper case files before they are destroyed pursuant to record retention schedules. Local agencies should keep a copy of the digitized files and send a copy to BCI to be stored in a central repository.**

Although the process of digitizing cold case files could be burdensome for some local law enforcement agencies, working group members point out that BCI currently offers cold case document scanning services to local law enforcement free of charge.

- 9 The Ohio Peace Officer Training Academy within the Ohio Attorney General's Office should develop advanced training for new missing persons investigators and law enforcement dispatchers.**

Providing local law enforcement with the best resources and tools available to help investigate missing persons cases is critical to bringing missing Ohioans back home. While law enforcement cadets do receive 14 hours of training exclusively related to missing persons investigations¹² during basic training, most law enforcement officers don't get involved in missing persons cases until they are well into their careers. **Members of the Ohio Missing Persons Working Group recommend that the Ohio Peace Officer Training Academy develop free, advanced training for law enforcement personnel who are newly assigned to investigate missing persons cases.**

The working group additionally recommends that similar training be developed for law enforcement dispatchers, who are often the first to interact with individuals reporting their loved ones missing. Working group members heard a particular example of a missing child case that resulted in the safe return of the child due, in part, to the swift, decisive, and professional actions of the dispatchers involved¹³. The role of police dispatchers in missing persons cases cannot be overstated, and working group members believe it is imperative to provide them with robust training.

- 10 The Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (OMHAS) and the Ohio Department of Health should develop a model policy outlining information healthcare providers are legally permitted to share with law enforcement officers investigating missing persons cases. These agencies should also develop a continued professional training course to further educate the healthcare industry on law enforcement exemptions to the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA).**

Through its discussions, working group members identified challenges that arise when investigators believe a missing person may actually be at a treatment facility or hospital, unbeknownst to the person's family. Group members found that healthcare providers are often resistant to confirm to law enforcement if an individual is under their care, even if the person has been reported missing¹⁴. Privacy regulations in HIPAA are often cited as the reason for withholding this information, but there are exemptions to HIPAA that allow the confidential release of protected health information to law enforcement in certain circumstances¹⁵.

Better education on these exemptions is necessary to help law enforcement confirm that a missing person is, in fact, not missing, while still protecting patient privacy. **The Ohio Missing Persons Working Group recommends that OMHAS and Ohio Department of Health partner to**

develop a model policy for mental health facilities and hospitals that outlines what information providers are legally permitted to share with law enforcement. The agencies should additionally develop training to better support collaboration between healthcare personnel and law enforcement. This training should detail how law enforcement and healthcare personnel can work together to communicate if a missing person is or is not located at a hospital or treatment center while abiding by federal laws pertaining to the disclosure of personal health information.

- 11 The Ohio Attorney General's Office should maintain a central repository of resources for law enforcement and families of missing persons.**

During their research, members of the working group found that there is currently no comprehensive list of Ohio resources available to support law enforcement and families of missing persons. While the Attorney General's Office does have a website providing some guidance, the working group believes this site could be enhanced with more specific information and best practices¹⁶. **The Ohio Missing Persons Working Group recommends that the Attorney General's Office expand its website into a central repository of resources for law enforcement and families of missing persons.**

The expanded website should include information on state and local resources, search and rescue teams, nonprofits, etc., that are available to support local law enforcement in missing persons investigations. Information tailored to families of missing persons should include tips on how to communicate with law enforcement, what to expect from law enforcement officers working the case, and a list of available resources specifically for families.

- 12 The Ohio Attorney General's Office and Ohio Department of Public Safety should partner to create educational resources outlining how and when to file a missing persons report.**

Families are often the first and most valuable source of information for local law enforcement investigating a missing persons case. Through conversations with family members of missing persons, the working group uncovered a common misconception that individuals need to wait 24 hours after a loved one disappears before filing a missing persons report¹⁷. This is not true. In fact, local law enforcement encourages early reporting to aid in rapid response, particularly when the missing person is considered to be endangered or high risk.

The Ohio Missing Persons Working Group recommends that the Ohio Attorney General's Office and Ohio Department of Public Safety work together to develop comprehensive educational resources to educate the public about how and when to file a missing persons report.

- 13 BCI should establish an annual conference for law enforcement and families with missing loved ones to collaborate, share best practices, and raise awareness about missing persons cases in Ohio.**

Because of the prevalence of missing persons cases across the state, it's important to regularly engage family members and law enforcement officers to keep them connected to resources, continuing education, and training. **Members of the Ohio Missing Persons Working Group recommend that BCI establish an annual conference purely dedicated to law enforcement agencies, families of missing persons, non-profit organizations, and other entities that support missing persons investigations.**

BCI already hosts an Ohio Missing Persons' Day event each year¹⁸ that aims to raise awareness about missing and unidentified persons and working group members believe a larger conference could be built around this annual event. The yearly conference should focus on sharing information, resources, and education on missing persons cases and when feasible, should include presentations from nationwide experts.

- 14 BCI should establish a confidential forum for law enforcement and intelligence analysts conducting missing persons investigations to discuss techniques, establish cross-jurisdiction collaboration, and perform case reviews.**

Criminal activity often spans various jurisdictions, requiring multiple agencies to be aware of case details to develop a coordinated response. The Ohio Department of Public Safety currently hosts virtual monthly law enforcement forums on topics such as drug trafficking and first responder wellness that have successfully encouraged collaboration between agencies, enhanced awareness of trends, and established resources¹⁹. Working group members believe a confidential, centralized forum focused on missing persons cases would provide a structured environment for agencies to collaborate, discover new techniques, and share resources and best practices.

The Ohio Missing Persons Working Group recommends that BCI establish a quarterly virtual meeting for law enforcement personnel and intelligence analysts to discuss investigatory techniques, establish cross-jurisdiction collaboration, and perform case reviews. All meetings should be exclusive to law enforcement to encourage the open sharing of information.

15 The Ohio Collaborative Community-Police Advisory Board should review and revise its missing persons law enforcement standard and model policy in accordance with this working group's recommendations. The revisions should include a best practices guide, developed in partnership with BCI, for working with family members of missing persons.

The Ohio Collaborative Community-Police Advisory Board (the Collaborative) within OCJS is responsible for developing Ohio's standards for law enforcement certification and accreditation. The Collaborative also provides model policies as a resource for agencies and is available to assist with implementation. **The Ohio Missing Persons Working Group recommends that the Collaborative work swiftly to update its missing persons standard and model policy to incorporate the suggestions of this working group. The updated model policy should also include a best practices guide for working with family members of missing persons.**

Throughout its meetings, it became increasingly clear that sometimes significant barriers exist in communication between law enforcement and families of missing persons. Family members shared their perception with the working group that they often felt disregarded and that finding their missing loved one was a low priority for investigators. Law enforcement representatives on the working group acknowledged the hardships in investigating missing persons cases and affirmed their commitment to the families of missing persons but agreed that a best practices guide would be beneficial for both families and investigators²⁰.



16 The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement should implement a process to notify state refugee coordinators within the Ohio Department of Job & Family Services when an unaccompanied minor is placed in Ohio.

According to the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, 11,873 unaccompanied minors have been placed in the care of Ohio sponsors since 2015²¹, but working group members learned that the agency does not notify the state of the children's arrival or placement²². Failing to notify Ohio of the placement of these vulnerable children means they are not on the state's radar, leaving Ohio law enforcement and other agencies unable to protect them from predators such as human traffickers.

The Ohio Missing Persons Working Group recommends that the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement begin notifying the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services when a refugee child is placed in the state. Providing Ohio with this information would not only allow the state to ensure refugee children are being protected and well cared for, but it would also significantly enhance the ability to coordinate and deliver essential wraparound services such as healthcare, education, and community integration assistance. Establishing proactive communication would also enable Ohio to work collaboratively with local partners to address capacity, ensure efficient resource allocation, and foster a welcoming and supportive environment during what is surely a traumatic time for an unaccompanied child.

The working group also encourages Governor DeWine to write a letter to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. to bring this issue to his attention.

17 The Ohio School Safety Center and Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles should work together to increase awareness of the ID R Kids youth identification card program.

The importance of providing photos to law enforcement as soon as possible after a child disappears is critical to helping locate them. Members of the working group learned, however, that it is sometimes a challenge for law enforcement to obtain a recent picture of a missing child²³.

The Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles (BMV) presented the working group with information on its ID R Kids²⁴ youth identification card program, which prints identification cards for minors. Because law enforcement is connected to the BMV's database system, they can easily and quickly access a child's photo in emergency circumstances. Right now, 83,350 state IDs are issued for kids under the age of 18²⁵, which represents approximately 3% of Ohio children²⁶.

Members of the Ohio Missing Persons Working Group recommend that Ohio BMV partner with the Ohio School Safety Center to raise awareness of the ID R Kids program at schools and encourage more parents across the state to purchase IDs for their children. ID R Kids identification cards can be purchased for \$10 at any BMV registrar location.

18 The Ohio Department of Children and Youth, Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services, Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation, and Ohio Office of Criminal Justice Services should work with local law enforcement to develop a pilot program that utilizes advocates to support at-risk youth who regularly leave their homes or group home settings.

Members of the working group discussed at length the issue of youth, typically teenagers, who choose to leave home or congregate care facilities on a regular basis. There are many reasons why a youth may repeatedly seek to get away, such as an abusive home environment or mental health issue, and they are often at a high risk of becoming victimized or trafficked²⁷.

As reported by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, children missing from care are a major contributor to missing persons cases in Ohio and across the nation²⁸. Members of the working group recognize the stress these reoccurring cases put on law enforcement agencies that are already stretched thin. **The Ohio Missing Persons Working Group recommends the Ohio Department of Children and Youth, Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services, Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation, and Ohio Office of Criminal Justice Services work with local law enforcement to develop a pilot program that assigns advocates to support at-risk youth and reduce the likelihood of ongoing departures from home or congregate care.**

The program should be similar to Denver, Colorado's, Runaway, Outreach, Notification and Intervention (RONI) Project²⁹, in which staff with social work backgrounds provide critical support to family members of missing persons and connect missing persons with services upon return. According to those with the RONI Project, this program has saved the Denver Police Department 6,000 hours of time per year³⁰.

To analyze the efficacy of this pilot program, an evaluator/ researcher should study program implementation and outcomes to help the state determine the success of the program, areas for improvement, and whether the program should be expanded to other areas of the state.



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