



City Council Hearing
Testimony Supporting Bill #150009
September 11, 2015

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Good Morning, My name is Audrey Coccia. I am Co-Executive Director of a Philadelphia non-profit organization called Vision for Equality. We provide advocacy, training, and monitoring services yearly to hundreds of people with Intellectual Disabilities and Autism and their families who live in the City of Philadelphia. We hold contracts with the City's Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual Disability Services and the Pennsylvania Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Developmental Programs to provide these services.

I would like to begin by first thanking the members of Council for holding this hearing today and especially, Councilman O'Brien for proposing this Ordinance regarding amending Title 21 of the Philadelphia Code, entitled "Miscellaneous", that will establish a policy of posting all missing and endangered persons alerts on City websites and social sites. I believe, this amendment to Title 21 will greatly expedite efforts to recover vulnerable adults who go missing before they are put in harm's way and hopefully bring them back home safely.

We urge City Council to support this important amendment. We believe this will enhance and aid in the search and recovery of missing persons who are at risk of harm due to their disability or mental impairment. Our organization works closely with individuals with disabilities, and their families and know first-hand just how frightening it can be when a person with intellectual disability or autism goes missing.

Wandering or elopement is the tendency for an individual to try and leave the safety of a responsible person's care or a safe area. This behavior is considered common and short lived in children but for those with mental impairments of any kind it may persist or re-emerge in adulthood. With anyone with intellectual or mental challenges of social and communication skills and safety awareness, this can be a serious concern.

Wandering or elopement is an extremely dangerous behavior. Studies have shown individuals with autism and those with more significant intellectual disabilities, dementia or Alzheimer's disease may be more likely to elope and it can have disastrous outcomes for them given their vulnerability. It can end up in encounters that are life-threatening or in some cases even deadly. These individuals can go missing for a variety of reasons. They may wander away from home and become lost. They may become disoriented for some reason due to their mental or cognitive impairment or bored and walk away from staff. They may get separated from caregivers in a crowd or at an event or during a disaster. This is very problematic because due to their disability they often do not know their name, address, or phone number and have challenges in self-awareness and in recognizing dangerous situations. So they wander from safe settings, often with tragic consequences

Roughly half, or 48% of people with autism spectrum disorder or intellectual disability, have challenges understanding safety issues. They often have a general inability to think, act, or communicate to gain assistance from others if they are in trouble. They may not just become separated or walk away from a caregiver but also be missing for hours. One large study on elopement found that about half of individuals with autism who elope have had at least one instance in which they were missing long enough to cause their caregivers to be concerned about their wellbeing and safety. In particular, individuals who go missing may be at increased risk for a traffic injury or a drowning event or be harmed by others. According to the Alzheimer's Association, vulnerable individuals who go missing if not found within 24 hours, nearly 50% of them will be put at risk of serious illness, injury or death? This can occur from exposure to the elements, lack of food or hydration. There is no question wandering or elopement is a critical safety issue that puts very vulnerable people in harm's way.

We here in the Philadelphia area are no strangers to horrific outcomes when vulnerable people go missing. On March 6, 2014 of this last year on a freezing cold day a young woman named Christina wandered off from a paid caregiver who was busy looking at jewelry in Macy's right here in center city Philadelphia. Christina had severe autism, was non-verbal and had little to no coping skills. A search was untaken when it was finally reported to the police but for Christina it was already too late. The call was just to the police and Christina could not be located by them. Her body was finally found early the next morning half naked laying

between two parked cars at 57th and Master, five miles from the store that she wandered away from. We knew Christina and her mother and the following morning one of our staff received the tragic call from her mom telling us of her loss after Christina was found dead. The mom's anguish on the phone call to us to tell us what happened was beyond description.

A few years ago another young man with intellectual disabilities who was from Philadelphia wandered away from his family's home, sadly sat on the train tracks and was killed. Several times a year here in Philadelphia people with intellectual disabilities, autism or mental illness elope from day programs or group homes. Sometimes it is broadcasted but often not. In most of those situations, thank God the person was returned safely but it is not always the case. This past fall an elderly gentleman with signs of dementia wandered away from a restaurant in the NE Philadelphia area and later was found dead. Each year we hear several stories of elderly individuals as well wondering off from their family home or nursing home sometimes, again with tragic results.

These types of incidences can happen quickly even with great oversight and supervision. My husband and I were on a vacation this last winter with our daughter. Our daughter, Gina has significant intellectual disabilities, cannot speak and has no fear of strangers or traffic. The three of us were shopping for food at a grocery store. She was by our side. In just a flash as we were putting the food on the conveyer belt she disappeared. I started running through the store, looking up each aisle. I could not find her. Calling out to her would make no sense since she could not reply. Your heart begins to race and you try desperately to figure out where she might go. After not seeing her anywhere I decided to quickly rush outside for fear if she left the store she might walk into traffic and thank God I found her sitting on a bench. Needless to say the incident was upsetting even though the outcome was good. So, yes wandering or elopement can happen quickly, even with constant supervision but when it does a quick response and recovery is imperative.

We are beginning to see a patchwork of sophisticated alert systems to recover vulnerable missing adults developing throughout the United States. There is even a present national effort and a Bill introduced in Congress by Senator Schumer of NY to help provide funding for law enforcement to enhance alert systems throughout the Country. These systems administered at the state and local levels,

are intended to alert law enforcement entities and in some cases equally important, the public that adults with cognitive impairment or other disabilities are missing and may need assistance. This would alert everyone this individual may be a high risk of going missing and unable to make their way home or to a safe place. If this more sophisticated approach had been in place for Christina perhaps she would not have lost her life.

Members of Council we need you to enhance our present system and pass this proposed amendment so our most vulnerable citizens in Philadelphia are protected and so we can rest assured that through the cooperative efforts of the Pennsylvania State Police Alert System, our local law enforcement agency and the City of Philadelphia Alert system websites and social website people diagnosed with mental or cognitive impairments, developmental disabilities or dementia are quickly identified when missing. This type of cooperative effort will allow for a rapid dissemination and response and hopefully a positive outcome-a safe return for those who are vulnerable and need our protection.

Thank you for your time and consideration.