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(Hansard)**

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**Standing Committee on
Justice Policy**

Missing Persons Amendment
Act, 2024

1st Session
43rd Parliament

Thursday 16 May 2024

**Comité permanent
de la justice**

Loi de 2024 modifiant
la Loi sur les personnes
disparues

1^{re} session
43^e législature

Jeudi 16 mai 2024

Chair: Goldie Ghamari
Clerk: Thushitha Kobikrishna

Présidente : Goldie Ghamari
Greffière : Thushitha Kobikrishna

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CONTENTS

Thursday 16 May 2024

Missing Persons Amendment Act, 2024, Bill 74, Miss Taylor / Loi de 2024 modifiant la Loi sur les personnes disparues, projet de loi 74, Mlle Taylor	JP-677
Miss Monique Taylor.....	JP-677
Chiefs of Ontario; Kawartha Lakes Autism Advocates; Ontario Autism Coalition	JP-681
Ms. Nancy Johnson	
Ms. Ashley Ferreira	
Ms. Leah Kocmarek	

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON JUSTICE POLICY

COMITÉ PERMANENT DE LA JUSTICE

Thursday 16 May 2024

Jeudi 16 mai 2024

The committee met at 1331 in committee room 2.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Thushitha Kobikrishna): Good afternoon, honourable members. In the absence of the Chair and Vice-Chair, it is my duty to call upon you to elect an Acting Chair. Are there any nominations?

MPP Saunderson.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: I nominate MPP Quinn.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Thushitha Kobikrishna): Does the member accept the nomination?

Mr. Nolan Quinn: Yes.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Thushitha Kobikrishna): Are there any further nominations?

There being no further nominations, I declare the nominations closed and MPP Quinn elected Acting Chair of the committee.

MISSING PERSONS AMENDMENT ACT, 2024

LOI DE 2024 MODIFIANT LA LOI SUR LES PERSONNES DISPARUES

Consideration of the following bill:

Bill 74, An Act to amend the Missing Persons Act, 2018 / Projet de loi 74, Loi modifiant la Loi de 2018 sur les personnes disparues.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): Good afternoon, everyone. I call the meeting of the Standing Committee on Justice Policy to order. We are meeting today to begin public hearings on Bill 74, An Act to amend the Missing Persons Act, 2018. Are there any questions before we begin our public hearings?

Hearing no questions, I will now call on the sponsor of the bill, MPP Taylor, as the first witness.

MISS MONIQUE TAYLOR

The Acting Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): You have up to 15 minutes to make an opening statement, followed by 15 minutes of questions and answers from the committee. The questions will be divided into one round of 5.5 minutes for the government members, one round of 5.5 minutes for the official opposition members, and one round of four minutes for the independent member of the committee.

MPP Taylor, the floor is yours. Please begin.

Miss Monique Taylor: Good afternoon, everyone. I want to start by thanking the Standing Committee on Justice Policy

for bringing Bill 74, Missing Persons Amendment Act, 2023, forward and hearing from oral presenters who are here today as well as written submissions that have been submitted.

Bill 74 was ordered to second reading on March 6, 2023, and then discharged pursuant to standing order 77(a) on March 28, just over three weeks later, to this very committee.

Since tabling Bill 74 in the Legislature, we have heard from several voices and several of our constituents who have reached out through MPPs' offices—concerned voices who have been affected or impacted by a local story of a missing or vulnerable person. They have shared their grief, their bereavement and their need to find a way forward to protect and increase local awareness for missing and vulnerable persons—voices that, for over a year, have expressed to this very day how Bill 74 makes sense.

While I recognize I have been granted 15 minutes and have a lot to share, I must acknowledge the collective support to the vulnerable persons alert—support that has poured through in petitions, including “Draven Alert,” started June of 2022, which has 91,799 signatures online; “Love’s Law,” started December 16, 2022—6,242 petitions online. The Bill 74 petition on my own website, started March 6, 2023, has 2,358 online signatures and over 300 signatures which have been read into the Legislature.

Bill 74 is a common-sense bill and it’s intended to be another tool in the tool box, an enhancement to support local police, to bring our vulnerable missing loved ones home quickly and safely.

The heartbreaking stories of Draven Graham and Shirley Love inspired this bill. The impact felt by their families, friends and community continues to inspire and drive the awareness and advocacy for this simple solution into our current alert system.

In June of 2022, the body of a missing 11-year-old boy Draven Graham was recovered from Scugog River in Lindsay, Ontario. Police say Draven was found about 24 hours after wandering away from his home, prompting police from several jurisdictions, including the OPP, to join volunteers in search for the youth, who had limited verbal skills and had serious irritation to touch.

In December 2022, the family of Shirley Love, a senior with dementia, say she slipped by her husband and left a Mount Albion apartment home in my city of Hamilton, not dressed for the harsh, cold day and only seen on security footage showing her walking in the area of Glendale golf

course. Police would find the 80-year-old's body just days later in the Kings Forest area 1.2 kilometres from her home.

Both Draven and Shirley were vulnerable. Both were found close to home. News reports tell us that both Draven and Shirley had been seen. Draven was playing in the water while people were passing by in a canoe. To them, this was typical child behaviour, but Draven was not typical. Shirley was seen walking down the street, smiling, saying hi to people—people not recognizing that she was in distress. The passersby did not know that she was in danger. Both may have had a different outcome if a local alert had notified these passersby.

I want to share words of their families. These are quotes. First, from Justin Graham, who is Draven's father: "This isn't just about my son, Draven, or children in general. This is for anyone that has a disability. This bill is not only to protect our children and loved ones, but for the safety and peace of mind that they're going to be safe going forward."

Lori Brown is Shirley Love's daughter. She says, "My mom went missing on a sunny, December afternoon, and bitter temperatures and darkness would fall within two hours of her disappearance. She was not dressed for winter weather and her confusion would prevent her from seeking shelter or returning home. Two hours was all we had. My mom died cold and alone in the brushy area of a nearby golf course, a tragic end to a beautiful life that could have been prevented with a simple alert."

Bill 74 can be that simple alert, the safety tool that draws attention to vulnerable people.

Both Draven and Shirley had a cognitive impairment. Cognitive impairment is defined as problems with a person's ability to think, learn, remember, use judgment and make decisions. Signs of cognitive impairment include memory loss and trouble concentrating, completing tasks, understanding, remembering, following instructions and solving problems. Cognitive impairments often present themselves in other health determinants such as autism, dementia, Alzheimer's and multiple sclerosis.

As we know, Canada has a national alert system, well known as the Amber Alert, which is provincially operated. The goal of the Amber Alert is to involve as many community members as possible in the search for an abducted child, each community member becoming the eyes and ears of law enforcement. Any of the police services in Ontario can submit a request to the OPP for an Amber Alert, so long as the following guidelines are met:

- the child has been abducted;
- the child is in imminent danger, which is the risk of bodily harm or death;
- broadcasting the alert will help find the child; and
- one or more descriptions of the child, the suspect, the abductor and/or the vehicle.

These criteria are purposeful in the abduction of a child, but not people who are cognitively impaired. They would be excluded from this alert.

Other alerts have been implemented in other provinces, many of which are technology heavy and rely on the latest devices and, in some cases, downloading apps or providing registration details—alerts like the Silver Alert, which

Quebec has piloted and British Columbians are advocating for at this time and still waiting for implementation. In fact, there is a Silver Alert Canada advocacy group that has been petitioning the federal government for years.

When discussing Bill 74 in the chamber, other alert mechanisms have been suggested, such as Project Lifesaver. People in that program wear a small bracelet with a transmitter that sends out a radio tracking signal 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If caregivers notify the police that that person is missing, a specially trained emergency response team will use mobile tracking equipment to find them. People must buy into that program. The program has to be available in that region, and that is not the case currently. So this is effective, but it's not a one-size-fits-all approach.

Project Lifesaver bracelets are not childproof, they are not water-resistant, and they are not comfortable for all people with heightened sensitivities. We have heard firsthand from parents, guardians and caregivers who have shared that they have found those life-saving bracelets chewed off on bedroom floors, missing devices later found flushed down toilets. The sensitivities of some children and adults just can't handle the ability of wearing that bracelet all the time. So, a great solution for many, but again not a one-size-fits-all.

Most recently, I have heard of the Rescu app from Missing Children Society of Canada. Their missing child alert uses technology and social media and is still being advocated for across Canada. This app and program in its current state is for children only, requires a smartphone and, again, to download an app, and uses SMS messaging. The regional approach aligns with the spirit of Bill 74; however, it is only available for people who know of and who take the time to download the necessary app. I myself did not know about this app until I looked it up and saw it—and then, of course, I downloaded the app right away because I wanted to see how it worked. It's regional for a province. But, again, if I didn't download that app, I would not receive notification that a person was missing.

Today's proposal under Bill 74 is geographically focused. Previous meetings with Emergency Management Ontario have verified the ability to geographically target the area, which makes sense. Emergency Management Ontario is the organization that manages the alert systems, such as the Amber Alert, the weather alerts, all of the alerts that we receive on our phone. This is done by Emergency Management Ontario, and they have specifically told me that you can draw on a map and specifically target the area that makes sense. Again, this, of course, would still be at the request of the local police and OPP.

Regional targeting will reduce alert fatigue. This is not a broad range. We know directly that if I'm receiving this alert, that it is someone in my community that has gone missing. This affects me personally. It is very close in my nature of where this person may be and for me to keep an eye out. Am I going to check my backyard? Am I going to watch people who are walking down the street? I may see them on a bus. It's very local, it's very regional, and so, again, that takes away that fatigue portion that people are concerned about.

Search-and-rescue efforts are a grassroots effort that, time and time again, have proven to be effective and timely. Bill 74 will be an additional layer that could make a difference.
1340

At the heart of Bill 74 are the voices and families of those who have went missing and did not return home safely. I have a quote from Alina Cameron, who is the president of the Ontario Autism Coalition: “The Ontario Autism Coalition commends MPP Monique Taylor for her commitment to ensuring the safety of all Ontarians, and for her leadership in introducing this important bill. The Missing Persons Amendment Act, 2023 is a vital step towards improving the safety and well-being of all Ontarians. We urge all members of the Ontario Legislature to support this non-partisan, common-sense proposal to ensure its swift passage.”

I also have a quote from Cathy Barrick, who is the CEO of the Alzheimer Society of Ontario: “A vulnerable persons alert would help avoid some of these tragic outcomes, and the Alzheimer Society of Ontario fully endorses a local, targeted alert system to help quickly locate vulnerable people, including those living with dementia. There are steps we can all take to recognize the risk and prepare for someone we know who lives with dementia going missing.”

Joining them are letters of support and motions from municipalities, organizations, community partners, advocacy groups, stakeholders and individuals who are advocating for Bill 74. We have shared life stories, lived experiences, opportunities, but most important is the hope that, when a missing, vulnerable person wanders, family, friends and community find reassurance in knowing that every tool that is available to us has been used.

Together, with the passing of Bill 74, we can ensure that our communities have the ability to bring loved ones home safer and away from danger.

Bill 74 is the necessary tool that is missing, with the criteria to save lives. I often talk about this. As I have explained, there are many tools available already. There are mix-and-match pieces here and there. There is not one system that catches all, and I don't think that anybody really is looking to build one system that catches all. I think there are different levels of criteria, of tools, that can be used.

This, to me, is when all other tools fail. This is the panic button. This is the one that says, “This person is in danger.” This is Shirley. This is Draven. This is that person who really—if we see them, know that we're going to bring them home safely. Like I said, it could be anyone in our neighbourhood, anybody in our community, the person who we're seeing on the bus or sitting in a bus stop, walking down the street, playing in a park. Just having the ability to allow the community to know that that person is at risk—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): One minute remaining.

Miss Monique Taylor: —is just that one step closer to ensuring that our loved ones come home safely.

Thank you very much for allowing me the time to come here today to share this bill that is obviously quite requested by so many throughout the province, and I just

hope that we can work on this bill together, pass it through quickly and ensure that we do have this alert system.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): Thank you, MPP Taylor.

This round of questions will start with the official opposition. MPP Wong-Tam.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Thank you, MPP Taylor, for your presentation, your outstanding advocacy and, I think, your expansive hard work on this issue. I know that you're coming to this after doing a lot of community consultation, and that's where I want to start my questioning.

When developing this bill, you spoke to a number of stakeholders. Just for the record, who did you consult with when you were putting together this bill?

Miss Monique Taylor: Yes, thanks. There was the Hamilton Police Service that I talked to, the Alzheimer Society, advocacy for the elderly, the autism coalition, the emergency alert system, Community Living—I'm trying to think of which other ones. I'm sorry; I should have a clearer note here, but I don't. But there was a lot. We did a lot of work trying to make sure that we weren't getting it wrong, that we were getting it right and that it made sense. So, yes, that was the majority of them, I think.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Okay. Thank you.

With respect to bringing everyone to the table, obviously, that takes a lot of time and energy, especially on a private member's bill. I'm curious to know: While you were also doing your research and environmental scan across jurisdictions, was there one jurisdiction in particular that really stood out that was doing this type of work well, especially when it comes to an adult version of the Amber Alert?

Miss Monique Taylor: Well, that's the thing, right? We don't have any adult version here in Ontario. We know that Quebec is doing a pilot program, BC is working on trying to do it, but we weren't able to have the time. I know we tried to talk to folks in Quebec, but it didn't come through, so we don't really have a good handle on how they were managing. But there is no adult system for us here currently. There is only the Amber Alert for an abducted child.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Your bill speaks about the definition of a vulnerable person. I recognize that it's not exhaustive, but you identify people who have less cognitive abilities, maybe people living with mental illness and perhaps those who are elderly—the conventional definitions around vulnerability. Was there any consideration around the intersection of identities; for example, 2SLGBTQI people who may be vulnerable, people who are living without status, people who are BIPOC? Is that layered into the thinking and the premise of the bill?

Miss Monique Taylor: This alert is very specific for people with cognitive impairments, so if someone from that community fell under that—of course. But this isn't to be about some of our mental health constituents or homeless, because that would cause the fatigue of the alert. That would burn out the alert. It would be going off all day.

We know the numbers in Hamilton: We have over 1,700 that go missing a year. In Toronto, I can't imagine the number of people who actually go missing or when family members

are concerned that they haven't seen them. This isn't that type of thing. This is something that is very specific: "Hit the panic button. We need to find the person now," or they're at risk of immediate danger because they just don't have that ability to create that problem-solving awareness that, "Oh, I'm not supposed to be going here." They shouldn't even be without a caregiver.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Thank you. I think that's really helpful to know just in terms of understanding how the bill is sculpted and that it actually has a rather limited and curated focus.

When someone vulnerable goes missing, what is the wider societal effect?

Miss Monique Taylor: We all watch on our social media, and when someone goes missing, we're all heartbroken, but we don't know what to do. But again, it's only if I'm watching social media. I know that, as a community, we all want to band together. We all want to make sure—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): One minute remaining.

Miss Monique Taylor: —that we're doing our part to keep people safe. So having the ability of knowing first-hand that someone is missing in my community and that I could literally just look out my window or have a peek in my backyard and I've done my part I think goes a long way to the goal.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Thank you. My understanding is that there is not a lot of research done on missing persons in the country or the province, and oftentimes when someone who is marginalized or vulnerable does go missing, they don't get the attention that they need.

I'm curious to know: With respect to the police that you spoke to, the Hamilton police, they're asking for this particular tool. Is that correct? They are endorsing this—

Miss Monique Taylor: No, they did not endorse it. They didn't think it was right for them to endorse it. They thought that—because it goes literally through the OPP, they wanted to be cautious and they wanted to be thoughtful to see how it was. They do think it's a good idea. They recognize that there are never enough tools. But no, there was no formal endorsement made.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): Unfortunately, that's all the time we have for this round of questioning.

We'll now go to the independent. MPP Mantha, you have four minutes.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Was there anything else that you wanted to leave off or mention answering her question?

1350

Miss Monique Taylor: No.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Okay. I just want to thank you, Monique, as a colleague, as a friend, as an advocate for this particular Bill 74 and the tenacity that you've had over the course of the years. My hat is off to you.

I want to thank the committee, everybody in this room, for doing what the Ontario Autism Coalition asked us on the lobby day a few weeks ago. I'll read from their lobby day. It says, "We need all members of provincial Parliament to put politics aside and pass Bill 74 because it will save lives." That comes from the OAC vice-president, Mr. Tony

Stravato. I don't know what kind of a lobby day it was; I remember hosting you in my office. But it was effective because we're here today. We're not done, but we're getting closer.

My question to you, Mrs. Taylor, is—

Miss Monique Taylor: Miss.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Miss? Okay. The importance of notification, and ample notification, and the importance of what that means in order to find your loved one and reunite them with your family, the importance of getting everybody on the same page at the same time in the same area—how much of an impact is that going to have in returning a loved one to their family?

Miss Monique Taylor: For sure. Just in the two stories who are the drivers of this bill, we know that both of them were seen in the community by people who had no idea that they were in danger or at risk. A simple notification in that local area possibly could have notified those people that they were in danger and could have changed the outcome. I just think that there are opportunities, that this notification will completely make sense for that catch basin when they don't fit in anywhere else.

We need people to take care of our vulnerable populations. They have to be the first and foremost thought for our communities. This tool will allow them that ability to participate in that recovery.

Mr. Michael Mantha: You will be leaving this room very shortly, or all of us will be leaving this room very shortly. We'll be hearing from three other advocate organizations shortly after you. What are your expectations as far as what we need to do as parliamentarians to move this forward? And what kind of a timeline would you like to see this expedited in order to be successful and become law?

Miss Monique Taylor: Perfect. Thank you for that question. As I've always said, I've always been open to change and to making sure that we can get the bill right, that whatever it takes—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): One minute left.

Miss Monique Taylor: —to change the wording in the legislation to reflect maybe deeper criteria of folks who it is to catch—whatever it takes, let's just get it done. Take the politics out of it and really just focus on vulnerable people in our communities who we know this will actually make a difference for.

The timelines: Of course, the quicker that we can get it done, the better chance that we have of saving someone's life.

Mr. Michael Mantha: I want to thank you again for your tenacity in this particular bill. As a part of the committee, you can count on my support to try to move this as quickly and efficiently as possible. Thank you again.

Miss Monique Taylor: Thank you. I appreciate it.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): The next questions will go to the government for five and a half minutes. MPP McGregor.

Mr. Graham McGregor: Thank you, Miss Taylor, for bringing the bill forward. It definitely is something I think all parliamentarians need to put a priority on.

I couldn't help but think of a time when I was 20 at home, sitting on the porch, and a kid runs down the street. We're going, "Okay, why are you running down the street?" "Oh, a four-year-old girl went missing. She ran off on her parents." The neighbourhood kind of activated. This is Heart Lake, where I grew up. The neighbourhood activated. We were all kind of in the car, driving around, running through the trails etc., etc. It was very word-of-mouth, but I think the point of that story is that communities can be responsible for safety. It's not something we can always just leave in the hands of government or police etc. We have a responsibility, obligation as residents for each other.

I wanted to talk about one of the things that you mentioned in your presentation. It was Project Lifesaver and some of the challenges that kids have where they'll chew the bracelet off or they'll take the bracelet off etc. Is that specific to people living with autism or is that a problem with dementia, vulnerable seniors etc.? Is that a specific problem for vulnerable people? Or do you think that's broad-based, that anybody with cognition vulnerabilities has that same problem with Lifesaver?

Miss Monique Taylor: I think that any one of us could have a sensitivity issue—we don't like a certain material on our skin or whatever. How do you answer that question? Those sensitivities could happen to anyone. So would it be autism-specific? No. But we do know that the sensitivities are very high in the autism world. A lot of the stories that I heard were specifically from autism parents who tried several bands, because I believe there are several bands that you can try. Nothing was working, so now they go without. It just didn't work.

You can imagine, this mom wanted it to work because her child is a high flight risk. They really want it. My daughter ties air tags into my granddaughter's pants because she is a flight risk. People are trying to be creative, but anything can happen. If that air tag falls into water, is it going to work? I don't know; probably not.

Again, those programs are fantastic, and if they're going to work and take that time off other police duties and stuff like that and go to that focus, that's fantastic. That program is not everywhere; it's in very small areas. I think it's in York right now. I'm not sure where else it is. It's not a catch-all. For a start, if it's working, you don't need to use this.

Mr. Graham McGregor: It doesn't catch everything.

I do have more questions, but I know my colleagues do too, so I'll yield my time.

Miss Monique Taylor: Of course.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): MPP Coe.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you, MPP Taylor, for your delegation and the work that you've done on the bill thus far.

In discussing the regional targeting approach that you did, it made me wonder about the extent beyond Hamilton, where an opportunity might be to engage with the regional governments—there are six across the province—and the ability to engage with their police services as well as their public health departments, and their willingness, based on what you've just outlined, to engage both with you but also

with the Ontario Provincial Police as well, as they do regularly, being an upper-tier government.

In my case, in the region of Durham, we have close to a million people. What you've described in your delegation to us today, as brief as it was, there are instances that potentially could occur in the region of Durham. I know our police service and our public health department look for opportunities to collaborate—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): One minute remaining.

Miss Monique Taylor: There are several municipalities that have already endorsed this. The letter that came out from the Ontario Autism Coalition had several organizations endorsing this. I think people see this as a way forward, so I'm looking to the committee to build the best bill that we can, to build the best effective system that we can, and just really get it out there to communities to be that catch-all for when nothing else is working.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you for your response.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): There are 30 seconds remaining.

Miss Monique Taylor: If I could, I just really want to say thank you. I know when I first brought this bill forward, I talked to all members in the Legislature, and everybody was excited about it. Everybody thought it was a good idea. Whatever happened, and how it got discharged and all of that, only the powers that be will know, but I'm grateful that we're here today and that we are talking about this. Hopefully we can get it going.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): Thank you, MPP, for your time.

CHIEFS OF ONTARIO

KAWARTHA LAKES AUTISM ADVOCATES

ONTARIO AUTISM COALITION

The Acting Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): The remainder of our presenters today have been scheduled into groups of three for each one-hour time slot. Each presenter will have seven minutes for their presentation, and after we have heard from all three presenters, the remaining 39 minutes of the time slot will be for questions from members of the committee. The time for questions will be broken down into two rounds of seven and a half minutes for the government members, two rounds of seven and a half minutes for the official opposition and two rounds of four and a half minutes for the independent member.

I will now call on Nancy Johnson, from the Chiefs of Ontario. You will now have seven minutes for your presentation.

1400

Interjection.

The Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): Apologies. All three can come forward to the table.

Perfect. I'll call on the Chiefs of Ontario, Nancy Johnson as well as Donna Debassige. You will now have seven minutes for your presentation. Please state your name for Hansard, and you may begin.

Ms. Nancy Johnson: Greetings. My name is Nancy Johnson. Before I begin, if the Clerk would like, I have one hard copy of the brief and one hard copy of our speaking notes. As well, we've emailed it just a little while ago.

Greetings, everyone. My name is Nancy Johnson. I am the director of women's initiatives for Chiefs of Ontario. I'm being joined virtually by our elder and knowledge keeper Donna Debassige, who is our knowledge keeper on behalf of the First Nations Women's Council for the Chiefs of Ontario. We're here to bring forward the recommendations of the Chiefs of Ontario First Nations Women's Council to the Standing Committee on Justice Policy, regarding Bill 74, An Act to amend the Missing Persons Act, 2018.

Let me first and foremost make it clear, this appearance before the standing committee is not to be interpreted as consultation or engagement and does not satisfy the duty to consult. Chiefs of Ontario's submission to the committee simply reflects the input of the First Nations Women's Council regarding the incomplete nature of Bill 74.

We will be sharing our speaking notes today along with our full brief, which provides more information on our work in support of First Nations' leadership and details from our research.

The First Nations Women's Council recommends that Bill 74 includes specific language identifying Indigenous women, men and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people as a distinct class of "vulnerable peoples" with the associated rights under this act, and that processes to establish a Red Dress Alert in alignment with a national alert be accommodated.

In regards to the language used in Bill 74—that of "vulnerable persons"—Indigenous women, men and 2S+ people must not be categorized under the catch-all classification of being vulnerable due to "other circumstances." The circumstances that make Indigenous people prone to being disproportionately affected by violence are those of historical and ongoing colonization. This needs to be named.

In May 2023, the House of Commons unanimously adopted a motion that declared the ongoing crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and 2S+ people a national emergency, and called for funding for an alert system to inform the public when an Indigenous person is missing.

In 2023, the federal budget supported the establishment of a national round table with Indigenous representatives, alongside federal, provincial and territorial delegates, and stipulated that a Red Dress Alert be discussed as a priority. A national round table was convened on February 7 and 8 of this year.

We know that Indigenous people continue to face violence at disproportionately high rates, including "violent victimization"—physical and sexual assault—at nearly three times the rate of non-Indigenous women, and experience disproportionate rates of intimate partner violence, higher than any other group of women in the country.

Statistics that we are highlighting today do not paint a picture of safety or security for the future of First Nations people, including our youth. Being or having been a ward of the state is associated with a greater likelihood of experiencing violent victimization at any point in one's

lifetime. This includes involvement in the child welfare system, group homes, youth justice facilities or residential schools. We know that there are more First Nations children in the child welfare system today than at the height of the residential school system and the Sixties Scoop, which displaced nearly 200,000 Indigenous children. The 2021 census found that over a half of all children in foster care were Indigenous, despite making up only 7.7% of children in Canada.

Human trafficking is another form of the violence that continues to claim the lives and well-being of our people from First Nations communities. A 2014 national task force on sex trafficking of women and girls in Canada found that approximately 50% of trafficked women and girls in Canada are Indigenous. As of 2022, over two thirds of trafficking incidents in Canada occur in Ontario, with the highest rate of incidents being in Thunder Bay at nearly 6% per population of 100,000.

The First Nations Women's Council urges the standing committee to further amend the language in the bill defining "vulnerable persons" such that Indigenous women, men and 2S+ people are specifically identified. The council urges this refinement to be undertaken by engaging with First Nations representatives.

The council recommends that any vulnerable persons alert established in Ontario be developed with the direct input of Ontario First Nations and in conjunction with the national Red Dress Alert, and utilizes the vast repository of knowledge collected throughout the national round table engagement sessions.

The development and implementation of such an alert must also address cross-jurisdictional issues and include language specifying protocols and memorandums of understanding between First Nations and bordering municipalities, provinces and/or international states, given the proximity of many First Nations communities to these borders.

Acknowledging the sovereignty of each First Nation, the council advises that the vulnerability of each missing Indigenous person, and hence the severity of each missing Indigenous person's case, must be determined by family members, community members and/or service providers with adequate knowledge and experience.

There is a lack of any central data repository for reports of missing and murdered Indigenous people in Ontario or Canada. Expanding the proposed amendment to include vulnerable Indigenous people is a step towards the standardized collection of missing and murdered Indigenous people's data. First Nations principles of data sovereignty, including ownership, control, access and possession of data, will need to be respected as processes for missing and murdered Indigenous people's data collection are determined.

Studies show that Indigenous women's experiences of violence are often taken less seriously. We hear from our First Nations community members that police often fail to engage at the same level of urgency as the family of a missing loved one—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): One minute remaining.

Ms. Nancy Johnson: Thank you—and that the families are not believed. Establishing a legislative precedent outlining the fact that Indigenous community members are prone to higher levels of vulnerability is a step in the direction of equitable engagement and investigation.

So in summary, further refinement is necessary to reflect the reality of our Indigenous loved ones being disproportionately prone to facing harm, going missing and being murdered. Indigenous women, men and 2S+ people must not be categorized under the catch-all classification of being vulnerable due to “other circumstances.” Meegwetch. Nia:weh.

If our elder, Donna, wanted to make a few comments, please do—I don’t see her on the screen.

Interjection.

Ms. Nancy Johnson: I’ll ask the Clerk if she has—she hasn’t made any comment? Okay. Then I think in that case, we’re done. Thank you. Meegwetch.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): Thank you for your presentation.

I will now call on Ashley Ferreira from the Kawartha Lakes Autism Advocates. You have seven minutes. Please begin your presentation.

Ms. Ashley Ferreira: My name is Ashley Ferreira, and I stand before you today as a representative of the Kawartha Lakes Autism Advocates. Our mission is to raise awareness, advocate for change and support families affected by autism in our community.

Today, I want to share a deeply personal and heart-wrenching story that underscores the urgency of our cause. On June 12, 2022, I came across a post on Facebook about a missing 11-year-old boy named Draven Graham. Draven was autistic, non-verbal and his disappearance sent shockwaves through our tight-knit community.

Without hesitation, I joined the search efforts, hoping against hope that we would find him safe and sound. However, almost 24 hours later, on June 13, 2022, Draven’s lifeless body was recovered from the Scugog River. The tragedy of his loss hit me like a tidal wave. As a parent of an autistic child myself, I felt the pain and fear that Draven’s family must have experienced.

But this tragedy wasn’t just about one child; it was a stark reminder that we can and must do better. The families I represent live in daily fear that their own children could become the next tragic story. The constant worry, the sleepless nights, the overwhelming anxiety: It’s a burden no parent should bear. Unless you’ve walked in our shoes, it’s impossible to really understand the weight of this fear.

And so, I implore to you all to consider the gravity of our plea. We are not asking for the passing of Bill 74 as a mere bureaucratic formality. No, this is our last hope, a desperate cry to our community that a life is at imminent risk. Bill 74, Missing Persons Amendment Act, 2024, is our lifeline. It’s a chance to improve search-and-rescue protocols, enhance communication between agencies and prevent more families from enduring the heartbreak we’ve witnessed.

1410

Let me share another heart-wrenching chapter of unimaginable sorrow. On the fateful day of December 13,

2022, Shirley Love, who was bravely battling advanced Alzheimer’s disease, wandered away from the safety of her home while her husband was preoccupied for less than a minute brushing his teeth. Shirley, in the grips of her relentless illness, was driven by a deep-seated desire to return to the loving embrace of her parents, who had departed this world 40 years prior, a yearning that tugged at her soul.

Shirley’s husband, startled by the faint sound of the door, turned to find his beloved wife already slipping out into the biting cold. Desperation fuelled his efforts as he hurried to catch up to her, but Shirley’s determined pace, spurred by her confusion and longing, proved unstoppable. The bitter winter day added to the urgency of the situation, as Shirley, in her fragile state, was ill-equipped for the harsh elements of the raging snowstorm that blanketed the area. This only heightened the danger she faced, turning an innocent journey into an emergency.

For four agonizing days, Lori Brown, Shirley’s devoted daughter, combed the streets and tirelessly searched every corner, her heart heavy with worry and her mind plagued with the most dreadful thoughts. Lori’s efforts were compounded by the shocking discovery that many residents in the neighbourhood were unaware of Shirley’s disappearance, a realization that only deepened her thoughts full of fear.

Tragically, on December 16, 2022, after four long and intense days of searching, Shirley’s lifeless body was discovered lying just 1.2 kilometres from the safety of her home. It is believed that Shirley, in her impairment and confusion, succumbed to unforgiving cold, her body unable to withstand the brutal conditions of that fateful first night, leaving behind a trail of unanswered questions that will echo through time.

Draven and Shirley’s families share a common thread, the haunting question: “Would this alert have given us the best chance of having our loved one with us today?” Imagine carrying that weight, that gnawing uncertainty. It’s a question that pierces the soul, leaving scars that never fade.

This alert isn’t a mere bureaucratic check box. It’s for people like Draven and Shirley—those in imminent danger when they step outside, eloping from their caregivers. These are the most vulnerable of the vulnerable. Picture it: Someone wading into a river despite being unable to swim, another venturing out in a thin T-shirt during a minus-20 winter storm, or someone walking onto a busy highway ramp. This alert is their lifeline, the difference between life and loss.

We have a system. We have a duty. We failed Draven and Shirley because we didn’t see this clearly before, but now we can do better. We must always push for better.

Bill 74 is a start, but it can’t end there. Implementation matters. Localized alerts will save lives. When this alert saves a life, each of you should feel pride, the kind that comes from knowing you’ve made a difference.

To everyone listening invested in Bill 74: Keep adding tools to our tool box, and keep pushing. Our loved ones depend on it. Let’s weave a safety web that catches those who can’t catch themselves. And when the next Shirley or

Draven faces the storm, let's be ready with swift response and unwavering commitment to do better.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): Thank for your presentation.

I now call on Leah Kocmarek from the Ontario Autism Coalition. You have seven minutes for your presentation. Please state your name for Hansard, and you may begin.

Ms. Leah Kocmarek: Hello. My name is Leah Kocmarek, and I am a director with the Ontario Autism Coalition. The OAC is a volunteer-run political advocacy group of over 20,000 members. Our mission is to secure lifelong, permanent, scientifically supported government-funded therapy, treatment and services for autistic individuals and their families. I want to thank the members of this committee for calling Bill 74 to the floor and for their effort to understand the public's need for an alert of this nature.

Though I am here as a representative of the OAC, this bill is deeply personal to myself. I have a son who is particularly vulnerable, as he is autistic and non-verbal. This statement is a way of taking an active role in my advocacy for the autistic individuals and their families of this province, and to do everything in my power to ensure the safety of my son.

In 2021, there was a notification across multiple social media platforms from the Kawartha Lakes police about a young autistic boy that had eloped from his home. They shared a recent picture of him, noting he was non-verbal and used a tablet as a communication device. The autism community collectively held their breath for every one of the next 12 hours. I know families who dropped everything they were doing and drove to help search for him. Personally, I was ill and pregnant but still contemplating the three-hour drive to help find that little boy.

After several hours, the news finally made it around: Draven died alone and naked a few kilometres from his home, drowned in the Scugog River. On that same lake, there were two people fishing in their canoe. They both recalled seeing a little boy playing by the water and not thinking anything of it. Both adults had their cellphones on them, but did not see the social media posts warning of a missing vulnerable person. While we will never know if an push message alert like the Amber Alert would have ensured the safety of Draven, those two people will wonder for the rest of their lives, "What if we had known?"

Bill 74 aims to grant the police the power to issue an Amber Alert-like notification when a vulnerable person goes missing. Currently, there is only one standardized alert for any missing person across the province. Everyone has heard of the Amber Alert, but not everyone understands it can only be issued when a child is suspected to have been abducted. With thoughtful criteria based around cognitive impairment and environmental considerations, it is my understanding that Bill 74 could lead to a push message alert issued through either broadband, radio, TV or through text, like the Amber Alert.

The national Alert Ready system is an emergency broadcast system that issues alerts from severe weather to civil emergencies and missing children. Through agreements with municipal, provincial and federal governments, me-

teorological agencies, law enforcement and the telecommunications industry, a national emergency broadcast alerting system was established in 2015. Since that time, millions of people have been receiving emergency alerts of varying degrees directly in the palm of their hands.

With the existing Alert Ready system, the infrastructure required to implement Bill 74's vulnerable missing persons alert is already in place. With the technology utilized to pinpoint and issue extreme weather condition alerts, like tornado warnings, Bill 74 can deliver these notifications to members of the public in a specific geographic area. This would mitigate the risk of the entire province receiving an alert and only focus on people currently in the area of the vulnerable person.

When speaking to our community about their need for an alert, the same concerns were spoken of again and again. While most people generally trust the police agencies to locate their missing loved ones, there remain large gaps in the system that a push message alert could mitigate. There are 44 different policing agencies across the province, yet no uniform policy or procedure to notify the public when a vulnerable person goes missing. Many municipalities, such as Sarnia, Kitchener and Kawartha Lakes, have phone apps that locals can opt in to receive alerts for missing people, but these apps require costly promotion and the community at large to want to download them and keep them up to date. The issue where the community is not aware of missing persons remains, losing valuable time where it is of the most importance.

Another service that is mentioned quite often when discussing alerts for missing autistics is Project Lifesaver. Project Lifesaver is a pilot program where an individual wears a bracelet containing a tracking device that can be used to locate them in the event they go missing. Project Lifesaver relies on experienced search-and-rescue teams to use the wristband and tracking system effectively. The wrist-worn device is sizable on little arms, requires frequent charging and is not always waterproof. As such, the wristband may not be worn appropriately or at all by a population with sensory sensitivities, like autistic individuals.

The autism community appreciates the stopgap measures to ensure their loved ones safety, but as any caregiver will tell you, the issue of child safety can only be tackled with layers of protection. Families with an autistic loved one must remain constantly vigilant of our surroundings. They need to have an action plan should their loved one elope. At home, there are extra locks and alarms on every door and window. We note the exits of every room we enter and every unfamiliar space. For many families, the risk of elopement weighs so heavy that we stop going out altogether. We take every precaution, and yet the risk remains. It is only with many layers of mitigation that families with vulnerable loved ones can begin to feel welcome and safe in engaging with their communities.

This is the major ask of the OAC: Pass Bill 74 to add another layer of protection to our most vulnerable.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): One minute remaining.

Ms. Leah Kocmarek: An alert that can be disseminated to our community can mean the difference between life and death for an autistic child. When 85% of missing autistic children die by drowning, an alert to take a look in the backyard pool will save a life.

1420

Our hope in presenting to the justice policy committee is that you will understand the urgency and act. Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): Thank you for your presentation.

We will now begin with this round of questions. The official opposition, you have seven and a half minutes. MPP Taylor.

Miss Monique Taylor: Thank you, everyone, for your presentation today and for your interest in Bill 74.

To both Ashley and Leah: I know the work that you have put into this over the last year-plus to get us to this point, and so I truly want to say thank you to you and to other members of your community. You have really worked hard to get the awareness of the government to ensure that Bill 74 got here today. Without your advocacy, I'm not sure we'd be here, so I just really want to congratulate you and to say thank you for all of that hard work and endurance in getting us to this point today.

You definitely spoke on the reasons of why Bill 74 was created and why we started writing Bill 74. I'm curious to hear, now that you have a little bit of extra time, if you could share some of the stories that you hear from other families within the Autism Coalition and within your networks. Parents' fears, situations where things could have gone terribly wrong or have gone terribly wrong, just other families that you've heard from while talking about Bill 74—either or.

Ms. Ashley Ferreira: I've heard stories about parents. Usually, when our kids run out the door, we're not far. We're not very far behind them. I have a friend—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): Sorry, if you could just speak a little closer to the microphone, please.

Ms. Ashley Ferreira: Oh, sorry.

I have a friend, and he chased his son all the way out to a busy road and none of the cars stopped. They were just going around him. Like, nobody stops for these kids. It's shocking.

Miss Monique Taylor: Absolutely, right? I know from my own experience with my granddaughter that she has a mind of her own, that she's going to do what she wants to do, regardless of how much we're calling her back sometimes. She just wants to keep going, right? And without that, how quickly—we have locks on the tops of our doors where she can't reach because of how quickly we found that she figured out how to unlock the door and be out on that front lawn, as quick as a snap—so ensuring that there is a safety mechanism.

And I really want to be clear about that with the committee, that this isn't about that spur of the—things like, "Oh, yes, well, we know that they're probably down the street at the grocery store or they're at the neighbour's house." Things like that would actually be looked at and there would be criteria, where the OPP would finally say,

"They are nowhere we thought they would be, and so we're going to hit the panic button and find them."

Do you, Ashley, have any further comments on what you've heard from people within the community on your journeys of Bill 74?

Ms. Leah Kocmarek: Hi. If I can just interject, I want to share a story of—actually, from our president at the OAC. She lives up near Thunder Bay—not quite in Thunder Bay, but near it. She backs onto acres and acres of woodland, farmland, that kind of stuff. The police response is probably, at the low end, 20 minutes, if they happen to be in the area. It could be up to 45 minutes.

Her daughter is a flight risk, and there have been many times where her daughter has taken a liking to something else that she sees outside, and maybe she's in the bathroom, maybe she's tending to one of her other children, maybe she's just sitting and taking a break for a second, and she can't find her daughter. So she's had to rely on her own alert system, where she starts texting everybody in the neighbourhood, everybody that she can think of. They start texting and it's sort of like a train of people to see if they've seen her.

Recently, she found someone who had seen her daughter out by the cliff; they live sort of near a cliff. They don't know what she was doing there, but if she hadn't texted everybody, then I don't know if her daughter would have returned.

Miss Monique Taylor: Thank you.

Chair, how much time do we have on this round?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): Two and a half minutes.

Miss Monique Taylor: Two and a half? Thank you.

Nancy, thank you for your interest in Bill 74 and for all of the work that the women's council is doing. We've recently celebrated Red Dress Day, and it's taken years to get us to that point.

I know, as per your submission, that the federal government was looking at an alert system. As you were talking, we did a quick search and see that Manitoba has partnered just recently with the federal government to create an alert system that would help and have that red dress alert.

Have you heard anything back, or have you been in contact with Manitoba to see where they are in the process and what that actually looks like?

Ms. Nancy Johnson: Thank you for the question. Our understanding is that the announcement of the joint initiative between Manitoba and the government of Canada is a pilot project that was just announced within the last couple of weeks. So I would believe that they're very, very early on in the process.

At the national round table in February of this year, there was a technical report that was shared with all of the participants, including senior officials and ministers from across Canada—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): One minute remaining.

Ms. Nancy Johnson: Thank you—and all of those at the round table were informed about the technicalities around various types of alert systems. But there was also

a comment that this alert will need to be developed in partnership with provinces and territories.

Miss Monique Taylor: And so, in Ontario, we use the emergency alert system that you see for the Amber Alert. Is it the same system that they're using in Manitoba, do you know?

Ms. Nancy Johnson: It's just at the beginning stages. I don't think that's been determined yet. There are many different types of alert systems that are out there, and I know that the other speakers have described some of those. The concerns that we have, from the First Nations Women's Council perspective, is that it be gender-inclusive, age-inclusive, and that it be distinctions-based as well to identify First Nations from First Nation communities and to do that accurately. We've seen some examples where they weren't necessarily correct.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): Thank you. That's all the time we have for this question.

We'll go to the independent member. You have four and a half minutes. MPP Mantha.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Thank you to all the presenters. The wonderful thing about you coming here to committee is that we as politicians get to be educated. There are a lot of things that we don't know, and the purpose of you coming here is to inform us on a lot of those things.

I do want to say to Ms. Johnson: I really need to talk with you in order to get a better appreciation of vulnerable people in your communities as well. I'm hoping in my second round that I'll get back to you.

I do want to share a story with you; it ends in good news. Just recently, on the largest freshwater island in the world, on Manitoulin Island, the headline read: "How This Non-Verbal Autistic Man Was Rescued from the Northern Ontario Bush." A young man, Kaelan Shawana—his father is Robbie, who I spoke to this morning—24 years old, and he walked away from home. Imagine this: a 6-foot-6, 230-pound, lost gentleman who is walking the streets. Do you intercept? Do you ask them questions? He's non-verbal, so you don't. Normally, he wears a GPS; they've taken everything that they absolutely need, but that morning, he decided to change and the GPS was left at home.

The canine unit, the Manitoulin OPP, emergency response, the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, the township of Assiginack, the communities across Manitoulin Island and more than 30 officers all participated—and Dance, this beautiful dog; this is Dance—in getting Kaelan found.

Kaelan was found over 21 kilometres away from home. He had just walked away with a golf shirt on. His boots were full of water. He ended up in the hospital. He was deemed in very good health, but he was scratched and had a lot of mosquito bites and everything.

1430

But one thing I do want to stress is on behalf of the family. They wanted to say, "Thank you to the Manitoulin OPP, ERT, K9 units, MNR, Wiikwemkoong for the support and use of their drones, Redrum MC Spirit Island, our Manitoulin Special Olympics family, the township of Assiginack,

Locobeanz Manitowaning," who delivered food and helped with the search efforts.

Here's the key point: "Also to the Wiikwemkoong communication department, Mandy for spreading the word. Also for the Wiikwemkoong Crisis Team for their support." The key word here is "communication department."

Communication, when it comes to a family member who is a vulnerable person and is missing: How important is it to your organizations to make sure that that communication is out there and as quickly as possible?

Ms. Ashley Ferreira: A quick response is the difference between life or death.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): I'm sorry. If you could speak closer to the microphone.

Ms. Ashley Ferreira: Sorry. A quick response is the difference between life or death. If my child is out there, he's in danger.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Okay.

Ms. Leah Kocmarek: I just wanted to talk about a story that was outside of the autism community, but it happened recently here in Toronto.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): One minute remaining.

Ms. Leah Kocmarek: There was a man with dementia who had gone missing. After three days, the police issued a social media alert, basically asking for members of the public to come and find him. After three days, he was walking past a crossing guard, and she had seen his picture on the news and she rescued him. She said, "Oh, that's that guy who's missing," and he was returned to his family safely alive. He had walked, again, over 20 kilometres away from home. But if she had not seen his face on social media, he probably would never have been found.

Mr. Michael Mantha: We don't have much time left, but Nancy, I will be coming back to you in our second round. I'll prep you up for the question. I want to have a greater understanding as far as what you encompass in a definition of what a vulnerable person is, coming from your community, so I can get a better idea—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): Unfortunately, that's all the time we have for this round of questioning. I apologize.

Before we head to the government: Just as a reminder for the witnesses, they will turn on the microphones for you. You don't have to press any buttons.

We will go to the government. MPP Dixon, we have seven and a half minutes.

Ms. Jess Dixon: Thank you all for coming to present.

I'm going to direct my initial questions to Ashley and Leah. Looking at this bill, one of the things that we talked about and that MPP Taylor talked about is this idea of keeping it specific enough that people still pay attention to the alerts. What I'm curious about is, right now, if you can give me a sense of, within specifically the autism community, places where police services do have a vulnerable persons registry. I know that not everyone does. Is it common in the community for parents and caregivers to have the child or the person with autism registered with that service? Is it common in uptake?

Ms. Leah Kocmarek: I would say that through word of mouth, if you can understand that you have one of these vulnerable persons registries, then yes, because our number one priority is to keep our loved ones safe and alive. But again, it's limited, because not everyone has it. If you move, do you call up the police and have it updated? There are issues of privacy, because when you're talking about adults, not everybody understands that it's even available. So the issue still remains that it is going to take a lot more promotion and understanding from the police services and the community before something like that could be useful.

Ms. Jess Dixon: What do you think that would look like? Say we were to say that either every service had to have a vulnerable persons registry or that there had to be a provincial one. What do you think it would look like within the community to get people to participate?

Ms. Leah Kocmarek: Well, I have to say that that's part of the reason why we would like an alert, because with an alert, you don't have to register. It is exactly the same as an Amber Alert. When a child goes missing, and they think they've been abducted and they meet the criteria, there is no, "Let's go consult all of the children in the census." It's, "This is the information," it gets sent out and people get it. That will cut down on privacy issues because it's, again, the first name. There's not all this backstory. It's just, "You need to start looking, community, because a person who is in danger needs help." So I would say that while it's nice to have that idea, it's a Band-Aid, and we need a solution.

Ms. Jess Dixon: I'm not asking questions in a way of saying "no alert." I'm trying to think about how we would curtail it to the people that can be served, which seems to me to be people with autism who are prone to elopement, to wandering; dementia—a very specific group of people.

So what I am thinking about is this idea of—for example, Project Lifesaver. I understand all the things about the sensory issues and the bracelet; just, with the requirements for Project Lifesaver, you basically have to be somebody with dementia, autism or prone to wandering, and you have to be registered with the service's vulnerable persons registry, and that can allow you to have Project Lifesaver.

What I was considering is this idea of, what if, hypothetically speaking, there was a vulnerable persons registry available, and if one of the requirements is that you have a condition that leaves you prone to wandering, you have a caregiver, you aren't in a secure facility, the idea would be to preferably register with a vulnerable persons registry? What I'm thinking is, if there was more uptake, then when the alert goes out, you already have a lot of that information about where they go, what their interests are, that type of thing. I imagine that when a child or individual does go missing, the caregivers are in a very panicked state, and trying to provide that information in a state of panic becomes very difficult. That's why I'm interested in this idea of how vulnerable persons registries could be more useful if coupled with an alert system.

Ms. Leah Kocmarek: I understand you're not trying to be adversarial, but I feel like that's an extra unnecessary step, because we have some of those things in place and

it's not uniform. When you look at the requirements for an Amber Alert, you don't need to have any of that stuff. It's just these specific criteria. So, for an alert, it would be looking at criteria based on such and such a thing—I'm not a policy-maker so I couldn't tell you specifically. We could definitely give you suggestions on what to include in that, which would be cognitive impairment; the environment that you're in, such as weather; the clothing; and if they can speak—that's a very big thing.

But to have a registry, you have to keep updating all that information, because people change. When you're five, you're different than when you're 20. Children with autism and autistics are people, so your likes and preferences, your wants and needs change all the time, and to keep that updated would require almost an entire department for the police.

In general, we believe in the police department in effectively going and finding our children or our loved ones when needed. This is just a faster response. If the police can't get to us in 20 minutes but my neighbour three streets over knows that this child is missing—"I have a pool in my backyard. I could go and look. It takes three seconds. And I got an alert."

With our alerting system that's already available across the country, we get tornado alerts, and that is a very small geographic area. You get an alert for a tornado here; you don't get one up north. So if you were to partner with those technological systems already in place, then you could skip the step of—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): One minute remaining.

Ms. Leah Kocmarek:—having to update that registry all the time.

Ms. Jess Dixon: Again, we're talking specifically about autism: Particularly with kids and people who are eloping, would you say it's fairly typical for the caregiver to have a relatively good idea of where they went missing from, i.e., to be able to call the police and be like, "We were at home; they bolted," or "We were at the grocery store; they bolted." Do you think that is common, to have an idea of at least where they left from?

1440

Ms. Leah Kocmarek: Yes. I would say that for this particular community that we're talking about, they're extremely vulnerable. Whether you have dementia or you have Down's syndrome or you have autism, we're talking about cognitive impairment, so your logical thinking, your executive functioning, which is planning and acting, are very impaired. So you are going to have somebody with you, your caregiver—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): Unfortunately, that's all the time we have for this round of questioning.

We'll go back to the official opposition for seven and a half minutes. MPP Taylor.

Miss Monique Taylor: Thank you for your thoughts on that matter. While I agree with criteria, I think a registry is actually more of a hindrance. If there is a registry available, then that's quicker information for the police to access, but I don't think that anybody should be turned away for not being registered to a system. If a person is vulnerable

and in danger, they're vulnerable and in danger whether they're registered or not. So thank you for your time on that.

I wanted to, for a moment, go back to Nancy and talk about the alert system because I'm curious as to what that's going to look like. I also am cognizant of the notion that with this being private member's business, we're not allowed to ask for funding. With the Red Dress Alert, I believe the federal government is looking at a system to address that. I know that in discussions, we're talking about how to support you on that request and seeing if we can get something like that in Ontario. Really, just having that necessary function to ensure that we can help push your voice on the Red Dress Alert is important to us.

I'm grateful that you came here today so that you've raised that awareness with us and given us that opportunity, because you can count on us to support you through that measure. It's good.

Ms. Nancy Johnson: Thank you. We appreciate that. I think, from our perspective as well, the conversation is still very early. Reaching out to Ontario was something we thought would make sense at this point because of this opportunity with a legislative amendment. However, our perspective and our issues are unique to our communities and have been long-standing. And yet, even in 2024, we still can't tell you how many missing and murdered Indigenous women there are in Canada, even after the national inquiry. So data is one of our areas of concern.

Vulnerability: To get into that issue, I think we'll probably have another conversation about that shortly, but our perspective is that because of all of the statistics that we've highlighted, the "legacy of colonization," as it's stated in the original legislation from 2018, is ongoing. It's continuing. The impacts continue to be felt, and so you see that in the disproportionate levels of violence and the impoverishment behind the story for so many of our people, particularly our women and young people and so, as well, for our two-spirit.

In terms of what it will look like, the conversation is going to continue to happen for the foreseeable future, I would say, at the round table level, whereas there may be some initiatives being undertaken in different provinces. For example, Manitoba: Everyone will be watching to see how they go about piloting that. They have shared with us at the table that Winnipeg in particular, in Manitoba, is one of the hubs, unfortunately, and we all know that. We've seen that in the media, so there's a lot of pressure as well there.

But we have the same issues in Ontario. We talked about the human trafficking, for example. We are learning more and are more and more aware of the connection between issues in our communities and the vulnerability and the levels of risk, which are very, very high.

Miss Monique Taylor: Well, I applaud you for paying attention to what's happening here in Ontario and noticing that this was happening today. I just want to encourage you to keep up that great work because the more people who you talk to, the further ahead we'll get in making sure that we get that alert.

I'm now going to pass it over to MPP Wong-Tam.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Thank you very much. I recognize that when it comes to notification systems for the missing, the missed, the vulnerable, timing is everything—making sure that there's a quick turnaround with respect to notification to the authorities and the expansion of notification to the community. By adopting Bill 74, as is, would you agree—and I'm going to ask the first two speakers—that we shouldn't waste any more time, not that time is wasted, but we should speed up the process on adopting this bill?

Ms. Ashley Ferreira: Yes.

Ms. Leah Kocmarek: Yes. That's a resounding yes.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Thank you.

To you, Nancy, to the women's council and to the Chiefs of Ontario, recognizing that there's a federal pilot project under way with Manitoba at the helm, I gather by just reading very quickly—just a very early scan—that they are wanting to develop the program that allows them to roll it out across the nation. I regret that I didn't know about the program earlier. I noticed that they just announced it on May 5, so we're not entirely behind the eightball.

But because they wanted to develop a national standard, would it be helpful if we provided a letter on behalf of, perhaps, the government and the opposition and everyone, if we can get to that agreement; that we ask that the federal government include Ontario in the next round of expansion so that we can be early in adapting what would be a national Red Dress Alert program? Would that be something that your organization would support?

Ms. Nancy Johnson: I would say that our organization would be very much in favour of an opportunity for technical discussions to take place where Ontario First Nations representatives can directly be involved in having discussions around the definitions in the act of "vulnerability" and what those alert systems look like, because there are a lot of complexities. For First Nations, there are many different policing agreements. So even when we've been sharing—

The Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): One minute remaining.

Ms. Nancy Johnson: —examples of people going missing, from our community perspective, unfortunately, sometimes it has taken a long time for that to get rolling. The picture can look quite different in our communities.

So, yes, we would like to see support from Ontario, but we need to know that Ontario First Nations are directly involved.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Yes. I think that's an important point to highlight. Just the impetus, the fact that there's a catalyst there, there's a program that's rolling out and there are federal dollars attached to it, I would strongly suspect that if Ontario, the most populous province of Canada, raises its hand and says, "We want in to partner with you to develop part of the national program"—I can't imagine the federal government saying no.

Thank you for bringing this to our attention. I'm really glad that we're here today with you. To all of the speakers, thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): We'll now move on to our next round, the independent member. MPP Mantha, you have four and a half minutes.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Thank you very much. I'm one of those individuals that—I don't pretend to have all the information. I rely on individuals like yourselves, who took the time to come into my office, sit down with me, stress your point, share your personal issues and educate me in regards to what's important to you and where you want to see this go.

I rely on individuals like Dennis Lendrum, who is the grandfather of an autistic boy, from Espanola. I rely on Jo Beyers, who has really brought me up to speed in regards to the needs of her adult son—his name is Blake, but he's also known as Crash—who got a job as a radio announcer in Winnipeg and is a well-renowned author now. It's amazing. I rely on Adrianna Atkins and I rely on Danielle Paananen out of Manitowadge, who have sat with me many times at the coffee shop, sharing their personal struggles that they have with going through the process and the battles that they have—and Alina Cameron, who has been a champion through all of this.

Now, I'm looking at you, Nancy. I want to have a chat with you in regards to what you left off on: the definitions and the complexities of what you want to identify or want to see under Bill 74 as a “vulnerable person.” Going forward, I want this to be the beginning of those discussions. I know it's happening at a national level, but there seems to be—if it's going to happen at the national level, there is going to be some coordination that's needed from the provincial level as well. I'm really keen on hearing from you what those definitions are so I have a better understanding.

Ms. Nancy Johnson: Thank you. It would take some time for discussions to take place within our First Nations Women's Council and within our Ontario First Nations Leadership Council to be able to provide an actual response to that question. We can give lots of examples right now, but the procedure and the process is one in which our First Nation governments' responsibilities on behalf of our people would need to be respected.

1450

I think some of the information that we've shared already in the brief start to give you the answer that you're looking for when we talk about vulnerability based on the circumstances of people's lives, based on the fact that many times, our women may go missing voluntarily because they're looking for safety, they're looking for a safe space and support and help. So how do we document that? Where do we track and how do we collect the information that shows? And how do we improve relationships and communications, as you mentioned, where in some communities—you mentioned Wiikwemkoong—there may be a number of departments and a number of programs in place, and in many of our other First Nations communities, they will have no such thing? They will have no such thing as a women's shelter nearby or a First Nations victim services program. They may have to rely on First Nation first responders, who are also engaged in fire safety and ambulance services and other services for the community, to try to also provide that kind of support. Having systems in place is something that we're hopeful that we can engage in across the board on behalf of all Ontario First Nations, based on what they are seeking.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): One minute remaining.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Well, as I said, let this be the beginning of those discussions. I need to educate myself. I wear the moose hide for a reason, and I'm surprised, and I'm actually disappointed in myself, that I didn't think of relating the moose hide to Bill 74. I see many of my colleagues that also wear the moose hide, and today being May 16 is one of those reasons—again, I'm actually disappointed in myself that I didn't think about how important this would be in relation to this bill.

Thank you all for coming to the committee and for taking the time to help us to greater understand the need and the purpose and the urgency of passing this bill, but also the need and the urgency of looking at how we can actually go further and include more individuals to help others.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Nolan Quinn): We'll now go to the government side for seven and a half minutes. MPP Riddell.

Mr. Brian Riddell: I'd like to thank you all for coming in today. It's been very insightful. My thoughts are aimed more at Ashley and Leah.

I believe in a registry because a registry is there to give information to whoever is going to be out there searching. Even if you're not on that registry, of course, we would search for you anyway, so it doesn't matter, but the information is key.

As far as the alert system, I agree with that too, but there are still large areas. I have a relative with severe dementia. He can't find the cafeteria from his room, and this guy used to be a head of geography for a high school. It blows my mind.

As far as trackers—and I believe in technology and GPS trackers. Some of these, as I found out today—they're chewing them off. What percentage of autistic children and adults would have trackers on them? Can you answer that for me? Is it large? Is it small?

Ms. Leah Kocmarek: Well, trackers are relatively new technology, but I'm going to say that every autistic person has a sensory sensitivity, because they're humans. Everybody has them, but sensory issues are a really big problem for the autistic community. Even in my own home, my son has a very huge aversion to clothing in general, so he is never going to wear a tracker. It took us two years of therapy to teach him to keep his socks on and his shoes on when he leaves the house. So the first thing he's going to do is get naked and run off.

I know that people with dementia—you're not in your right mind. You don't know what's happening. Maybe you think that you're going to go to the pool, and you start taking off your clothes; or you get hot and you take off your clothes because you're hot, but you're actually in the middle of a blizzard. So that's where trackers are very difficult, because they must be worn.

Ms. Ashley Ferreira: I think when we're talking about the registry, we're talking about trackers, we're talking about a safety net. I don't think there's one solution. I think we need to fill the tool box. We need to keep adding; we need to keep expanding.

I think, when it comes to the tracker and the registry playing a factor in an imminent danger, the registry is great if the information is there to give out, but we need the community and their eyes. It's that minute we need them.

There are also trackers called AngelSense that parents use. They have a two-way radio on them. You have the option to turn it off. School boards will not allow us to send our kids to school with them on. They're expensive.

Project Lifesaver, some of the pilots are an opt-in cost. Some of our families can't afford that.

So I think when we talk about the alert, it's the last resort. They're not wearing the bracelet.

Mr. Brian Riddell: So you think it's a bad idea or a good idea?

Ms. Ashley Ferreira: I think it's all a good idea.

Mr. Brian Riddell: That's the answer I want to hear, because I think that too. I think, especially in the winter and if they're taking their clothes off, even if the clothes are there, it gives you an idea of where they were and you can find them, and I just think it's a better source. But, like I said, I believe in the registry, too, because it's a source of information for the police to get officers together and search dogs, and that takes time, and when you're outside in the cold, you aren't going to last long.

Ms. Leah Kocmarek: Yes, and I think—sorry; if I may interject again: I think, when we're talking about this population, a vulnerable population, people don't seem to understand how vulnerable they are, because you think, "Oh, well, they're an adult. They can go out and if it's cold, they stay inside"—that kind of thing. But when you're cognitively impaired, you just don't have that ability to understand your surroundings, and that's why it would be important to include cognitive impairment in any sort of criteria that we were looking at for an alert. And then, if you have sensory issues and you're taking off clothes and that kind of thing, then it just shows how much more important it is to have an alert that's quick that everyone can see. And, yes, I believe that it's layers of protection to protect them.

Mr. Brian Riddell: Yes, I agree 100%. Thank you very much.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): MPP McGregor.

Mr. Graham McGregor: Time check, Chair?

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Two minutes.

Mr. Graham McGregor: Oh, thank you.

I have a question for Ms. Johnson. Thank you for being here. Chi meegwetch. One of the things in your presenta-

tion and in your testimony today that's very apparent is the potential for unintended consequences and inaccuracies and insensitivities. You talked about the case of a missing woman who might be missing for very good reason and might not want to be found for her own safety, or their own safety. And you talked a little bit about accurately identifying Indigenous people: men, women, 2S+. With the time we have left, could you maybe just share any other of those unintended consequences or expand on what that means a little bit?

Ms. Nancy Johnson: Thank you. Well, there are a number of things.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): One minute.

Ms. Nancy Johnson: I think of our people who leave for various circumstances and, oftentimes, are in situations where there may not be any help for them. And there are also those who have, unfortunately, been lured by those that are predators, as well. And so, there could be a lot of different circumstances that are involved here. There's a really broad range of considerations and issues.

So, in having the conversation about an alert, that is the reason why we would need directly to have our families' input and our leadership through our women's council, because our experiences and those experiences of those who have gone through this inform.

Though, there are oftentimes, I would say, assumptions that have been made when families have reached out, and have, we understand, oftentimes been told—

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Thank you. Unfortunately, that's all the time that we have.

At this point, this concludes this round of presentations, and this concludes our public hearings on Bill 74. Thank you for your time.

Is there any additional committee business before we adjourn? MPP Saunderson.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: I have a motion. I move that the committee enter closed session for the purposes of organizing committee business.

The Chair (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): MPP Saunderson has moved to go into closed session. Is there any debate? All those in favour, please raise your hands. All those opposed? I declare the motion carried.

We'll take a brief three-, four- or maybe five-minute recess and then we'll resume in camera.

The committee recessed at 1504 and later continued in closed session.

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