



Wilson: A Plea for Action to Protect Foster Children

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Protecting children is our society's most sacred obligation.

President Barack Obama eloquently affirmed this principle in his speeches in the wake of the tragedy in Newtown, Conn. But every parent in America feels this instinctively in his or her heart.

This is why — as a parent and educator — I was so deeply shaken 12 years ago when a beautiful 4-year-old girl in the custody of the foster care system went missing in my own community. Rilya Wilson's foster mother, Geralyn Graham, continued to collect payments from the Florida Department of Children and Families for 15 months after her disappearance, during which time the agency never knew the little girl's whereabouts. When Rilya's disappearance finally was discovered by DCF, it took a full week to report her missing to local authorities. Rilya has never been found.

With this week's conclusion of her murder trial, I will be reintroducing the Rilya Wilson Act, a bipartisan bill that will increase state and federal officials' cooperation, transparency and vigilance to protect the lives of children in foster care.

Rilya's tragic case brings a serious national problem into focus. Foster children continue to go missing at much higher rates than their peers, and their disappearances tend to go unreported for much longer periods of time. Currently, only two states have procedures in place to ensure that their child

welfare agencies report known missing children and work with law enforcement agencies to find them.

During my time in Florida's Legislature, I was proud to pass the state's Rilya Wilson Act to ensure, among other objectives, that children in DCF custody attend school.

If a child in Florida DCF care is reported as absent from school, the school is now obligated under the law to report the absence to the child's caseworker. The caseworker is then obligated to visit the child and determine whether the child is within the custody of a proper guardian. If that child is missing, the caseworker must notify law enforcement, and law enforcement will then proceed to find the child. These simple steps could have saved Rilya.

I'm calling on the U.S. Congress to create similar rules nationally. Thousands of young lives depend on it.

The federal version of the Rilya Wilson Act — which received support from more than 100 bipartisan co-sponsors in the last Congress — would:

- Require state child-welfare agencies to report information on missing or abducted foster children promptly to local law enforcement agencies so that disappearances can be promptly reported to the National Crime Information Center.

Add a recent-photograph requirement to the information

that local enforcement agencies must report to NCIC. (Currently, only submission of a child's name, date of birth, sex, race, height, weight, eye color, hair color and medical and dental records, "whenever possible," is required.)

Ensure that state law enforcement agencies notify the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children of each report received relating to missing children from foster care. (Currently, agencies are mandated only to report to NCIC, while "maintaining close liaison with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children for the exchange of information and technical assistance in the missing children cases.") *Rilya Wilson's death was not only an unspeakable tragedy. It was also a breach of a sacred trust for society to take care of its most vulnerable members: foster children. While we cannot right the wrong that her disappearance represents, we can take an important step by passing this essential legislation in her honor.*

