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## **‘ATHENA ALERT’ BILL FLIES THROUGH TEXAS SENATE**

AUSTIN – The Texas Senate overwhelmingly passed an “Athena Alert” bill on Wednesday, allowing law enforcement to quickly issue a regional alert when a child goes missing without confirmation of an abduction.

The bill now heads to the desk of Gov. Greg Abbott, who is expected to hold a signing ceremony in honor of Athena Strand, the slain girl for whom the legislation was named.

“I am so grateful to Texas lawmakers for fast-tracking the Athena Alert and for everyone who has supported this legislation,” said Athena’s mother, Maitlyn Gandy. “It means so much to know that my daughter’s life will have a lasting impact.”

The Athena Alert is similar to an AMBER alert, except it allows law enforcement to quickly activate an alert in a localized area – within a 100-mile radius and to adjacent counties – where a child goes missing without

verification of an abduction. It essentially closes the gap between the time a child vanishes, and a statewide AMBER Alert may be issued.

House Bill 3556 was authored by Rep. Lynn Stucky (R-Sanger) and, on May 9, it was passed by the Texas House of Representatives. It was sponsored by Sen. Tan Parker (R-Flower Mound) in the Senate, where it passed on Wednesday. More than 31,000 people have also signed a petition in support of the law.

“The support for this bill has been overwhelming,” said Benson Varghese, Gandy’s attorney. “It’s a common sense bill that will save lives without creating a financial burden on taxpayers or an operational burden on law enforcement.

“The Athena Alert uses systems that are already in place for an AMBER Alert. The key distinction is that the alert can go out as soon as a child is known to be missing, in close proximity to their last known location. The higher threshold of knowing a child has been abducted is reserved for the statewide notification that the AMBER Alert provides. The sooner we can get the word out locally, the more chances we have to save a child’s life.”



On Wednesday, November 30, 2022, Athena was playing in the front yard of her father’s Paradise home in rural Wise County when she went missing. An AMBER Alert wasn’t issued until the following afternoon – about 24 hours later – when investigators determined that her disappearance met the strict

criteria for an AMBER Alert, which is codified in Texas Government Code Section 411.355 and requires law enforcement to “believe that a child has been abducted,” the alert was activated.

The following day, on Friday, Athena was found dead about six miles from her father’s home. A FedEx Ground driver, Tanner Horner, was arrested and charged with capital murder in her killing and kidnapping. He is facing the death penalty.

Rep. Stucky, who represents Wise County as part of District 64, filed the Athena Alert bill in March after consulting with Gandy and her attorneys at Varghese Summersett, which have filed a wrongful death lawsuit against Horner, FedEx and contractor Big Topspin in March.

Last month, Gandy and Varghese traveled to Austin to testify before the Homeland Security and Public Safety Committee, which voted unanimously to advance the bill to the full Texas House of Representatives. The bill sailed through both chambers and is expected to be signed into law soon by the governor.

“If this alert had been in place when my daughter disappeared, I have no doubt that the Wise County Sheriff’s Office would have activated it,” Gandy said. “Unfortunately, their hands were tied because my daughter’s disappearance didn’t immediately meet the strict criteria for a statewide AMBER alert.

“It was a helpless feeling that I wouldn’t wish on any parent. My hope is that every state will follow Texas’ lead and amend the law so that no other parent has to wait when their child is missing.”

- A video of Gandy and Varghese testifying before state lawmakers can be found at <https://versusinjury.com/athena-alert/>.
- The lawsuit, as well as public information about the case and events, can be found at [versusinjury.com/answers-for-athena](https://versusinjury.com/answers-for-athena).
- A petition in support of the Athena Alert legislation can be found at <https://chng.it/tJgLD9pkJq>.