

Testimony in Opposition to House Bill HB 476
Ohio General Assembly - Ohio Senate
Committee on Government Accountability and Oversight
December 6, 2016 – Columbus Ohio

Testimony of Zerqa Zafar Abid

Chairman Coley, Vice Chair Seitz, Ranking Member Yuko, and Members of the Government Oversight and Reform Committee

Thank you for the opportunity to present my testimony.

My name is Zerqa Zafar Abid and I am the founder and Executive Director of MY Project USA. I am also Founder and President of Muslims for Ohio Political Action Committee. I am a mother of three daughters. I live in Hilliard since 2007. I am a member of Hilliard City School District Advisory Council. I am an alum of Hilliard Citizen Police Academy. I have served as the PTO Treasurer of Hilliard Tharp 6th Grade School and the President of Hilliard Weaver Middle School. I am an owner of a small IT, media and event consultancy business as well.

I am appalled by the fact that the Ohio House passed this bill last week and that an amendment has been added to this bill that proposes to send more than a quarter billion dollars to the State of Israel, when we have hundreds of thousands of children and families right here that need our help now. As a mother, a community leader, a grassroots organizer and a small business owner, in the strongest possible terms, I oppose this bill. To make my point through, I would like to share my story with you.

My professional background is in TV production, marketing and campaign making. In the past, I have worked in MSNBC newsroom and have managed a foreign TV Channel. I have organized international trade and consumer shows and have launched and managed several teams across US to address different causes including Project Sakinah, a national initiative to address family violence within Muslim American Muslim community.

In December 2012, while searching for something on google, I learned about a 2010 arrest of a gang of 29 Somali Muslim men that were trafficking minor Muslim girls in Columbus for ten years. They were trafficking these victims to Tennessee and Minnesota. On further inquiries and meetings with people that were involved in the investigation of that case, I learned that some of these poor victims were actually those girls who ran away from their home due to parental abuse and they ended up being trafficked. They were also used to lure more girls. I started looking for the root causes and solutions. I found out that we have about seventy thousand Somali and Iraqi refugees just in greater Columbus area. A huge majority of these people are highly underserved and their children are at greater risk being trafficked, drugged or even radicalized. I became the first within the Muslim American and Columbus community to start public discussion about the sex-trafficking of Muslim minors in the US.

In August 2013, I was contacted by a public school teacher from the westside of Columbus who requested me to help her Somali Muslim students that she felt were at the verge of joining a gang or running away from homes due to the parental abuse and family issues. For the next fourteen months, I reached out to the community organizations, community leaders and general community hoping to launch some initiatives that would help save our children and families from the drug dealers and pimps. Did not achieve much. In October 2014, I finally made a major decision of my life. I dropped all my professional, paid projects and decided to commit myself to these youth and families as a volunteer. I launched MY Project USA.

MY Project USA is a nonprofit organization that focuses on the protection and empowerment of youth and families. We seek to address human trafficking, drugs, gangs, violent extremism, family violence and other issues through engaging youth in community service projects, by providing job training, by creating

employment opportunities, by offering youth and family counseling and by supporting their families through initiatives like MY Family Pantry, My Soup Kitchen, a goodwill type store called MY Deah's etc. We have launched a national initiative called Muslims Against Human Trafficking to raise awareness and to organize Muslim American community to stop human trafficking specially sex-trafficking and to support the survivors of trafficking. We are headquartered in Columbus and our pilot program is on the west side of Columbus. Our office is at Sullivant Ave. This area has a very dense population of Somali refugees and other very poor populations. Crime rates are very high in these neighborhoods.

Our pilot neighborhood is a particular apartment complex. It's a section-8 housing complex. It has 690 apartments. More than 90 % of these apartments are occupied by Somali refugees. These are very poor families, mostly single moms with large numbers of children. I have attended several meetings with the Homeland Security Department and the City of Columbus just to discuss this apartment complex since it has become a kind of gold mine for drug dealers and pimps to prey upon very young vulnerable children. Altogether, we have about 2000 children just in this complex at the risk of being trafficked, drugged, radicalized or victimized by a gang, drug dealers or pimps.

In order to save these very young children, we have to empower their parents. These adults need our support in the form of ESL classes, job training, cultural competency trainings, family counseling and parenting workshops. The youth in this area need solid mentorship programs, youth counseling and various other sports and other clubs and activities that would keep them away from any destructive path that might fail them otherwise.

When Abdul Razak Ali Artan, a young man that injured 11 people at OSU and was killed by the police last week, it broke my heart. He lived within the two mile of our office. His attacking his fellow beings, regardless of his bright academic accomplishments prior to the attack, is just a reminder for us all that how vulnerable our youth are. Although I have not made a single penny in last 25 months, I have worked 70 -80 hours a week, have successfully served hundreds of families and youth, I still felt guilty of failing this young man. I felt, if I had proper funds, staff and resources to expand services to more youth, we might have saved him. I am worried for hundreds of youth all over Ohio that are suffering in the similar circumstances regardless of their faith or ethnic backgrounds. The root cause to so many of these issues is the poverty and less resources allocated to fulfill their social and mental health needs.

According to authentic resources, currently Ohio ranks fifth in human trafficking, first in the death rates due to opioid overdoses and twenty third in the education systems nationwide. These are just three statistics that should literally make us think how much we can achieve by investing this quarter billion hard earned tax payers dollars right here in Ohio.

As a mother of three daughters, I could not sleep over the fact that someone's daughter would be sold several times a day for fifteen minutes sex, just because that poor mom or dad were incapable to protect her in time.

In last two years, my family and I have invested everything in this fight against pimps, drugs, dealers and other criminals. I need my senators and legislators to stand with me and support me by keeping this money in Ohio and investing it within our cities and communities. Please stop and kill this bill now and draft a new bill that would use this money to foster strong youth and families across Ohio.

Once again, I would like to thank you Chairman Coley, Vice Chair Seitz, Ranking Member Yuko, and Members of the Government Oversight and Reform Committee.

EXHIBIT A

1. According to U.S. Federal Bureau of Information Crime Reports, **Ohio** has ranked as high as fifth among all states in total reported **human trafficking** cases, with Toledo being identified as the fourth highest **ranking** city in the nation for recruiting victims into the illegal trade.

<https://www.odh.ohio.gov/en/features/odhfeatures/Human%20Trafficking%202015.aspx>

2. According to state-by-state statistics compiled by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, Ohio leads the nation in opioid overdose deaths.

<http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2016/11/29/ohio-leads-us-in-three-drug-overdose-categories.html>

3. Six years after ranking fifth in the nation, Ohio's education system has tumbled to 23rd among the 50 states and District of Columbia, according to a national report card released on in January of this year.

<http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2016/01/07/rankings-slide-in-national-report.html>