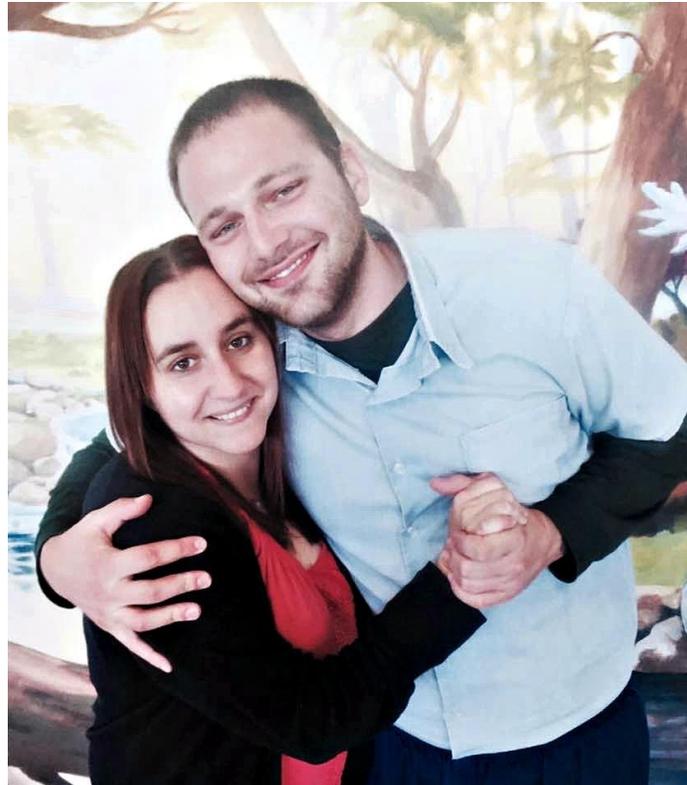


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Testimony in **Support of HB 394 With Amendments**
Revise Juvenile Procedures
House Criminal Justice Committee



Good morning, Chairman Manning, Vice Chair Rezabek, Ranking Member Celebrezze, and members of the Criminal Justice Committee. Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to testify in support of HB 394 with amendments. My name is Stefanie Tengler. I was born and raised in Germany, and moved to the U.S. when I was 21. I am now in my early thirties. Two years ago, I became a U.S. citizen. I have settled in Cincinnati, Ohio, where I began my teaching career through Teach for America and now work as an elementary school teacher. I am also currently completing my Master's Degree in Educational Studies from the University of Johns Hopkins.

Today, I testify in support of HB 394 with amendments, because I believe that *all* of our children have a capacity for growth and positive change. Not only do I see this in my work as an educator, but also in my fiancé Joshua. Josh has been incarcerated for close to 13 years now. He is serving 56 years to life since the age of sixteen. As current law stands, he will be parole eligible in 2061. By then, he would be 72 years old.

We need to give our most troubled teens a second chance at life. Josh and many others are deserving of it, because they have changed their lives around behind bars. Most of them haven't had a first chance to begin with. Josh, for example, is a survivor of extreme child sexual abuse. Between the ages of about eight and ten, one of his uncles sexually abused Josh for well over a thousand times. He would lure Josh into his home with presents, then take him to the woods or the lake to have sex with him in ways that are unimaginable. Sadly, Josh wasn't the only child in his family that was impacted by this abuse. One of his cousins took his own life, because he couldn't endure living with those memories. Josh also witnessed prostitution, gun violence, and substance abuse as a child. His father was addicted to crack cocaine, and so -at the age of six- Josh would come home from school, and his dad would show him how to package drugs. Back then, Josh couldn't escape these circumstances. They were his reality.



Josh (right) and his brother (left)

While Josh's childhood experiences explain some of the choices he made when growing up, I certainly don't want to make excuses for him. He made terrible mistakes when he was a teen, and he knows that he deserves to be punished. The crime he committed is something that will never go away, and Josh knows that better than anyone else. He will have to live with this pain for the rest of his life. The question is: Do we need to keep a remorseful, now almost 30-year-old man, who poses no risk to society, in prison until he's over 70 years old?

HB 394 with its amendments gives us hope that Josh would -one day- have the opportunity to be heard by the parole board. Although this wouldn't -by any means- guarantee his release, it would be a chance for him to share his story. In addition, it would allow the parole board to look at Josh's positive growth behind bars. If HB 394 is passed with its amendments, Josh would be eligible for parole after serving a total of 25 years. While this is certainly much better than spending his *entire* life in prison, it's still another twelve years for us. In twelve years from now, I will be

44 years old. Every chance of having our own children would then be gone. It is also hard for me to imagine that I would have endured prison life with Josh for 18 years. We have been together for more than 6 years now, and the pain that this has caused me is excruciating and –at times- unbearable. When we incarcerate a teen for life, we don't only punish *them*, but also their families who have to take the burden of incarceration.

I would hope that we could lower the numbers to 20 years for homicide cases and 15 years for non-homicide cases, much like what our neighbors in West Virginia did. This would still constitute a life sentence for our teens. They were only 15, 16, or 17 years old when they went to prison. Twenty years means that they are spending more time in prison than they have ever lived on the outside. Do you remember where you were in your life 20 years ago? Were you the same person than that you are now? My guess is that you and your circumstances have changed considerably. So have Josh's.

For the past six years, I have witnessed him doing any and everything he can to rehabilitate himself.



Josh and his service dogs in training

He trains service dogs for our veterans and for children with special needs. He has earned a paralegal degree with highest distinction and is now working on a psychology and social work program, consistently earning high grades. He was also one of 40 prisoners in the entire state of Ohio -out of 50,000 incarcerated individuals- chosen to participate in the Global Leadership Summit, a conference that broadcasts speakers such as Melinda Gates and Bishop T.D. Jakes. He participates in a variety of programs, such as the prison's community garden and a program that teaches the offenders about "Going Green." In the past, he also completed the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program through Xavier University. In addition to that, he holds a job as a porter and cleans up the prison yard day in and day out. From behind bars, he's trying very hard to prepare

himself for a life outside of prison. A lot of our teenage lifers have the potential to lead productive lives amongst us. All we have to do is give them a second chance. Thank you for allowing me to testify in support of HB 394 with amendments, and I am happy to answer any questions.