

Members of the Committee: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify today. My name is Brandon Chrostowski and I am a chef, restaurateur and businessman in Cleveland. I am able to testify before you today because a long time ago, I got lucky.

When I was a teenager I made mistakes and wound up in jail. Fortunately, for me a judge gave me probation instead of 10 years in prison. On probation I was mentored by a chef and realized my calling to be in the kitchen. I turned my life around because I was given a lifeline by a judge and my community. As a result I've become a successful entrepreneur that gives back to his community, instead of a hardened criminal.

Today, I run the Edwins Leadership and Restaurant Institute. Our non-profit provides free training to formally incarcerated individuals so they can pursue a culinary career. We've graduated over 166 students, 90 percent of them are working, we have over 40 jobs waiting to hire and only 2 have returned to prison. We also train inside of prison, ensuring that hope and a skill is being delivered inside the walls. Giving our students skills and a path forward is giving their life purpose and making our community safer.

I know from personal experience – both my own life and from those that we train at the Edwins Institute today – that the best way to create safer communities is to increase community supervision and to keep low level offenders out of the prison system.

Keeping low level offenders out of state prison keeps them from becoming more hardened criminals and it stops them from facing a lifetime of collateral sanctions or legal penalties that are so difficult to overcome – like having their driving license taken away or being unable to obtain an occupational license.

The additional investment in community programs that is proposed in the budget, combined with the reforms to keep low-level offenders out of state prison will not only save the state money in the short run, but it will change lives.

It's also in line with what crime survivors want. The Alliance for Safety and Justice did a groundbreaking study of crime survivors. They found that crime victims support shorter prison sentences and increased investment on prevention and rehabilitation including education, mental health treatment, drug treatment and job training. That's exactly what this budget delivers.

The proposal in the state budget will result in more success stories like mine and the graduates of our program. It will result in a safer state and more cost-effective criminal justice system. I urge your strong support.

Thank you.