

Members of the Committee: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify today. My name is Sonia Matis. I'm a sexual assault survivor and a volunteer in women's prisons and at a rape crisis center.

I have been on the front lines as I've seen the population of our women's prisons explode as lives get ruined and families get torn apart. There are over 4,000 women in Ohio prisons now – the fastest growing population in the state. The vast majority of women are in prison for non-violent drug and property offenses. This is true across the state and especially true in rural counties. Opiates are the primary driver of this crisis.

From my own work in women's prisons and rape crisis centers, I can tell you that many of the women have faced untreated trauma or were the victim of a crime that has led them toward drug abuse, risky behavior and the justice system. These women need our support. They need treatment and on-going counseling to end the cycle, they do not need to be sent to state prison to become hardened criminals.

The general public understands this as well. They read the headlines about heroin destroying our communities and they know it is every neighborhood of our state. Studies of crime survivors by the Alliance for Safety and Justice found that crime survivors favor shorter prison sentences and greater investment on prevention and rehabilitation. Crime survivors know that the way to end the crime and drug crisis is through investment in education, mental health and drug treatment and job training. Working on the front lines, I can tell you that they are correct.

I am extremely heartened by the budget proposal that includes record investment for community programs in lieu of sending low level offenders often on drug offenses to prison. Not only will these budget proposals save the state money in the long and short run, but it will be a major action against the drug crisis and literally save lives.

Our state has too many women in prison who shouldn't be there. Women who turned to drugs as an escape or who were forced into committing criminal offenses. It's been my mission to help and support these women. This budget will do the same.

Thank you.