



EMPOWERMENT. ADVOCACY. EDUCATION.
DEAF PHOENIX

**Written Testimony of Stephanie Smith-Bowman
Founder/Chief Officer of DeafPhoenix
Senate Health, Human Services and Medicaid Committee
House Bill 258
December 4, 2018**

Chairman Burke, Ranking Member Tavares, and members of Senate Health, Human Services and Medicaid Committee, I thank you for the opportunity to participate in today's hearing on House Bill 256. My name is Stephanie Smith-Bowman and I am the Founder and Chief Officer of DeafPhoenix. I am formally submitting a written testimony on behalf of Ohio's Deaf crime victims of sexual violence and our Deaf activists committed to safer and healthier Deaf communities.

Since 2015, DeafPhoenix is a statewide anti-violence organization composed of 11 Deaf and Hard of Hearing professionals serving Deaf, DeafBlind, DeafDisabled, Deaf LGBTQIA, Deaf Persons of Color, Hard of Hearing, Hearing Children (Adults) of Deaf Adults (CODA), and Kids of Deaf Adults (KODA) crime victims through advocacy, empowerment, and education. Our advocacy work with crime victims requires mindful co-advocacy with hearing allies to support the scope of the Deaf population that we serve in our great state. Ohio is the 4th in ranking nationally in the size of Deaf community accompanied by California (California School for the Deaf, Fremont and Riverside), Texas (Texas School for the Deaf in Austin, TX), New York (National Institute of Technology for Deaf), and District of Columbia (Gallaudet University). Within Ohio, the high number of Deaf communities reside in Columbus due to Ohio School for the Deaf, Columbus Hearing Impaired Program, Columbus Colony Housing, and Columbus Colony Elderly Care in Westerville, Ohio. Other cities do have schools such as St. Rita's in Cincinnati, mainstream oral programs in both Cleveland, and Toledo where hearing and Deaf families send their Deaf and Hard of Hearing children and youth for educational and socio-emotional services. According to U.S. Census Quickfacts, 10% of individuals with disability reside in Ohio totaling up to population of 1,165,860 including deafness and hearing loss.

To best gauge prevalence of crime victimization impacting national disability community, Bureau of Justice Services conducted a longitudinal study reporting that "overall the number of U.S. residents age 12 or older who reported that they had experienced one or more violent criminal victimizations during the prior 6 months increased from 2.7 million persons in 2015 to 2.9 million in 2016. During the year of 2015-2016, there were 1.1 victimizations per 1,000 persons." This number is staggering for individuals with disabilities in comparison to individuals without disabilities. DeafPhoenix, in the past three years, has received reports from Deaf crime victims that they've experienced at least SIX victimizations including language deprivation, child neglect, child sexual abuse (incest, molestation, sexual assault, and rape), family violence, teen dating violence, intimate partner violence, domestic violence, adult sexual violence, financial abuse, identity theft and fraud, human trafficking, animal abuse, and elder abuse in their lifespan. Language deprivation is a contributing factor rendering Deaf individuals vulnerable to poly-victimization. The prevailing view from pediatricians, audiologists, speech pathologists influence hearing and Deaf parents that spoken language is a preferred mode of communication to advance educational milestones as opposed to visual language in form of American Sign Language. Maximum language development is from birth to age of three for optimal human development, kindergarten

readiness, and future educational advancement. Information is auditorily shared daily over family conversations, radio, television, loudspeakers in public buildings and airports, and internet. Hearing children are encouraged to access sign language through baby Mozart videos whereas Deaf children are being led to hearing aids, cochlear implants, and speech therapy for spoken English language. Language deprivation leaves serious access gaps to body development knowledge; human rights; familial, platonic, and intimate relationship skills; safety planning; self-advocacy; and resources for assistance. Erroneous view of Deaf individuals' cognitive capabilities stemming from language deprivation has fostered harmful behaviors among parents, family members, medical providers, and educational institutions to prevent flow of access to aforementioned information and connections with Deaf schools during preschool and kindergarten years. Educational access restrictions adversely impact ability to gain customized vocational learning resources, college/university admission, employment with fair wage equity, and successfully navigate security of community resources. Stark realities of economic disparities between Deaf and hearing communities has been highlighted and validated in recent research from Opportunities from Ohioans with Disabilities earlier this year. The connection between oppression, language deprivation, compromised access to educational and community resources, and economic disparities renders Deaf individuals highly vulnerable to poly-victimization of familial and relationship violence, sexual violence, financial abuse, identity fraud and theft, and other forms of abuse.

In our advocacy work, Deaf crime victims consistently attribute to high occurrence of sexual victimization including incest, molestation, sexual assault, and rape resulting in pregnancy, loss of pregnancy, birth of a child, and sterilization against their consent. Their earliest recollections of sexual abuse at age of three to high school years from trusted neighbors, priests, sports coaches, family friends, grandparents, great uncles and aunts, cousins, and siblings. Disclosures have identified perpetrators more likely to be hearing than Deaf. Perpetrators rely on language deprivation adversely impacting Deaf crime victim's receptive and expressive capabilities to self-advocate their human rights and safety needs. When disclosure of sexual violence occurs, the Deaf crime victim's credibility is often brought into question by family members, professionals, law enforcement, and criminal justice system. DeafPhoenix is currently working with several Deaf crime victims whom have been forced to remain pregnant to full-term stemming from rape by fathers, stepfathers, grandfathers, uncles, intimate partners, acquaintances, and strangers who've paid for drug-facilitated gang rape. Our advocates have directly witnessed the magnitude of the trauma of sexual violence manifesting in lessened self-worth, self-hatred, loss of trust, grief, depression, suicidal ideation and attempts for a lifetime even with assistance from coordinated multiple systems of care including advocacy, psychiatric, and counseling services. Options for safety, healing, justice, and restoration is critical to preserve the sanctity of human rights for both Deaf and hearing crime victims.

Despite the population size of Ohio's Deaf communities, safety planning requires constant adjustments whenever crime victim decides to report sexual violence. The seriousness of the familial, social, and professional connection is easily identified despite confidentiality measures and poses significant barrier to accessing advocacy, criminal justice system, and related services stemming from direct experiences with reputation tarnishment, ostracization, unfair non-employment and termination leading to homelessness and poverty, and physical safety risks including loss of life. Disempowerment of crime victim's rights is magnified with victim blaming, stigma, and coercion. The sobering reality in seeking justice and resolution is that less than 3% of cases involving sexual violence is prosecuted due to harmful societal behaviors and myths. Our advocacy work becomes intensive to support Deaf crime victims to access services from first and secondary responders due to communication barriers, lack of culturally empowering resources and qualified trauma informed sign language interpreters, linguistically inaccessible materials and so forth. Advocacy provision for **one** Deaf/hard of hearing crime victim of sexual violence equals to three victims without disability or experiences significant access issues due to most organizations' capacity barriers with budget limitations for interpreting services, hiring of bi-lingual staff, and programmatic resources. Through our trauma informed co-advocacy model, DeafPhoenix team

creatively links statewide resources to provide a strong support system for Deaf/hearing crime victims which also necessitates mindful coordination in navigating bi-cultural realities with family and systems. DeafPhoenix's crime victim co-advocacy work is highly reliant on collaboration with Planned Parenthood and medical facilities whom are experts in reproductive care needs, family planning, and access to abortion options. Deaf crime victims have reported that the trauma of carrying to full-term stemming from rape far outweighs the choice of being empowered to heal their bodies and minds. The victim blaming and stigma from family, friends, colleagues, interfaith representatives, and professionals regarding abortion care is horrendous and compounds the severity of trauma leading to likelihood consideration of suicidal attempts. When access to this type of services has been denied due to societal myths/attitudes and economic disparities, Deaf crime victims have reported that they have taken unsafe methods including access to illegal providers with questionable medical services which has posed a significant health risk including infection and harm to their life. Their choice to reclaim their psychological and physical health through Planned Parenthood and medical facilities providing family planning and abortion care as a healing option is a fundamental human right.

HB 258 prevents this from occurring and is truly harmful to the safety of those we tirelessly serve. For the safety of crime victims in Ohio's Deaf communities, DeafPhoenix advocates for full access to medical, family planning, and abortion care as a healing option from trauma of sexual violence that is never the fault of the crime victim. Please consider empowering Deaf crime victims whom historically have experienced historical trauma from oppression, language deprivation, educational access restrictions, poor employment and wage equity options to be granted ACCESS to reproductive care including family planning and abortion care as a healing option in response to sexual violence victimization.

Respectfully,

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