

March 21, 2018

Chairman Bacon, Vice Chair Dolan, and the Honorable Members of the Ohio Senate Judiciary Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today. My name is Wendy Tarr. I am the director of the Vincentian Ohio Action Network, which was formed by the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Diocesan Council of Columbus (SVDP).

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is a Catholic lay organization that enables its members to live out the values of their faith and grow spiritually through person-to-person service to the needy and the suffering in the tradition of its founder, Blessed Frederic Ozanam and its patron St. Vincent de Paul. We have over 3,000 volunteers based in Catholic Churches in our region running food pantries, clothing centers, homeless shelters and community services. The Society also recognizes that it must assume a role of advocacy with those who are marginalized in order to alleviate poverty and address injustice.

I have been working with the currently incarcerated and those returning from incarceration in Central Ohio since 2014. I work with a range of individuals, community groups, faith-based organizations and reentry professionals attempting to improve reentry and address reform in the criminal justice system that upholds the dignity of the human person and create more safety and justice in our community.

I am here to speak in favor of SB 66, the "Modify Criminal Sentencing and Corrections Law." SB 66 is a bill that is rooted in a commitment to improved rehabilitation for people convicted of low-level felonies in the state of Ohio. This bill includes a number of positive changes including increased access to diversion and community-based programming, expanded eligibility for treatment-in-lieu of conviction, reducing automatic returns to prison for technical violations of probation or parole, and expanding record sealing and expungement opportunities for individuals reintegrating back to society.

I am here to express support for this bill and to carry the voices of people that I work with who are directly impacted. Many returning citizens we work with lack needed family support, educational or vocation skills, and housing. However, even others who do have these things still face serious challenges in their reentry. All are in need of changes in the law to help them move forward, especially in accessing employment that goes beyond the lowest paid positions with little to no career path options. Expansion of record expungement and sealing is critically important towards this goal. I would like to share a testimony from one leader in our group. He wanted his story to be used to support this legislation, but wished to remain anonymous:

"My experience is probably like many others who have been caught-up in the system and as a result, have been carrying the burden of being labeled an ex-offender. My offense was financial, personal, non-violent, but as a result of my education and profession morphed into multiple felony charges all being level 5 felonies---the lowest felony charge in the State. However the inability to get this record expunged or sealed lead to unexpected consequences.

Having done my time (18 months) I was released. Thankfully, I had a loving and caring family and support from my local parish and the SVDP Society, because finding employment was extremely difficult, almost impossible.

I have an excellent past work history and with advanced education, experience, professional training, talent and a strong work ethic, I felt that these qualities would overshadow my past mistakes. I was wrong!

I went on many interviews that initially went well, but upon my full disclosure (since most companies on their applications still ask whether one has any felony convictions) the door closed. Even organizations that didn't see my past as being significant, their HR departments wouldn't make an exception. I was, in fact on two occasions, even offered a job, started and then terminated once they determined I had a record. Even temporary hires, or companies that often hire felons, upon seeing my resume, felt I was overqualified and chose another candidate.

I am still unemployed after 3 1/2 years. Unfortunately, these same experiences occurred in finding housing. Since I was unemployed, my wife and I have sought to find a less expensive rental in a nice neighborhood, but zero-tolerance policies limited any choices.

Furthermore, my record in the public realm has had a negative impact on my wife's employment and the nature and scope of the work she does; not to mention our society's obsession of doing web-searches on their friends and neighbors.

I believe that proposed Bill 66 will have a positive impact in the community for individuals such as myself and their families. It would enable me to find employment in my area of expertise which would enable me to support my family, providing them a better quality of life, and allow me to make a positive contribution to the community."

I do believe this bill is very important and would make a huge difference in the lives of thousands of Ohioans. However, many people with substance abuse issues, addiction, and mental health needs may also commit a violent action connected to their need for treatment and support. If we are going to make real headway in reducing our prison population and helping people more effectively reintegrate we also need to be looking at provisions that address root causes and expand sealing options also for those with more serious felony convictions. I believe that granting judges more discretion in sentencing, diversion options, and record sealing on a case by case basis for all individuals who do not pose a serious ongoing threat to society will help achieve one of the stated goals of rehabilitation being a purpose for a felony conviction.

Finally, as you all know, there is a huge deficit in the community of addiction and mental health services. I hope this bill will result in concrete changes in this area. Ohio needs to have more treatment beds and a strong continuum of care to address the crisis in our communities. Community based treatment programs also need to provide aftercare to help support individuals achieve and maintain their recovery. I hope this bill will help achieve these needed changes to improve the health and safety of our community and its families.

Thank you.

Wendy Tarr
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