

Members of the Committee: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify today. My name is Brandon E. 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 created EDWINS Leadership and Restaurant Institute and have become a successful entrepreneur that gives back to his community, instead of a hardened criminal.

At Edwins Leadership and Restaurant Institute in Cleveland 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'm testifying today in favor of SB 66 because I know the difference it will make in Ohio. We need to give more judges the ability to divert low level offenders away from prison. My life was changed because a judge saw potential in me. This legislation will give more judges the discretion and tools necessary to get people treatment and skills so they can become success stories like me and not fall into the vicious cycle that too often occurs when someone is sent to prison.

This legislation also increases the state's focus on rehabilitation. That is a powerful idea and one we are focused on at the Edwins institute. It is also in keeping 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.

Our success at the Edwins Institute is a perfect example of the power of treatment in the community. Community settings not only cost the state less money, but they produce better outcomes. Offenders are able to get treatment and training so they can be successful members of society.

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.

Too many people go to prison on technical violations. I see it far too often. Sending people to prison for minor violations is ultimately harmful; it hardens them, destroys esteem and makes them a permanent member of the system. Addressing the behavior locally keeps the offender focused on reforming his or her life and getting the treatment and training they need to succeed. This legislation's focus on monitoring people locally is extremely important.

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.

This legislation along with proposals in the state budget will go a long way to making Ohio a safer state, with a more cost-effective criminal justice system. Most importantly, it meets the needs of crime survivors, while rehabilitating offenders. These proposals will result in more success stories like my own and those that we work with at the Edwins institute.

Thank you.