



**State Representative Jeff LaRe**  
**State Representative Cindy Abrams**  
*Sponsor Testimony - House Bill 429*  
*House Civil Justice Committee*  
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*Rep. Cindy Abrams*

Chairman Hambley, Vice-Chair Patton, Ranking Member Brown, and members of the House Civil Justice Committee, thank you for the opportunity to give sponsor testimony today on House Bill 429.

This legislation seeks to improve and expand the Safe at Home Address Confidentiality Program currently administered by the Ohio Secretary of State's office. Created by the 131<sup>st</sup> General Assembly, the program allows victims of domestic violence, human trafficking, rape, or sexual battery the opportunity to have their state and local records become confidential. They accomplish this by assigning program participants a substitute address to help keep their address from becoming a public record, ensuring their perpetrator does not discover them.

Over the first four years of administering the program, the Secretary of State's office has been in communication with participants to identify some areas of improvement that would further enhance their safety and security. For example, some participants are seeking to buy a house, however fear they may be found because of the public records laws involved in that process. Others involved in ongoing child custody cases have had difficulty shielding their address within the courts.

Current law prohibits any government entity from knowingly disclosing a Safe at Home participant's confidential address or phone number. However, there is no streamlined way of communicating who those participants are. Since a government entity may not "knowingly" disclose the information, the government entity is only required to keep the information confidential if it has knowledge of the participant's participation in the program. This lack of communication could put participants in danger. This bill simplifies that process by creating a way for them to follow this confidentiality law.

House Bill 429 seeks to address this feedback to ensure the safety of these victims as they continue with their everyday lives. Ohioans need this legislation now more than ever; during

the pandemic, there has been a surge of domestic violence cases, with a confirmed 20% increase in Columbus alone, and a 34% increase in domestic violence related homicides statewide. In my own district, just one of our domestic violence crisis intervention hotlines receives over 110 calls in a given 24-hour period from people seeking help. We hope this program gives victims a safe haven so they no longer live in constant fear of their former abuser finding them again.

*Rep. Jeff LaRe*

This legislation would authorize the Secretary of State's office to create a real property confidentiality notice for program participants who are interested in purchasing a home. The notice would be filed with the county recorder, and require that the participant's address and information remain confidential when communicating with the county auditor, county treasurer, county engineer, court of common pleas, and the Secretary of State's office.

Government entities, upon receiving a real property confidentiality notice, will need to update their searchable databases to reflect changes. The participant's information would not be confidential for the staff members of government entities while performing the duties of their respective office. Nor is there any requirement to redact any original records. Rather, should someone request a program participant's information, like with all other public records requests, these government entities would only have to redact confidential information on copies given to members of the public.

Furthermore, this legislation would allow the Secretary of State's office to disclose confidential information on behalf of the participant to entities such as the United States Postal Service, the BMV, a judge or magistrate, schools, public assistance, and food pantry administrators. This would only be done with the participant's permission, in order to confirm their enrollment in the Safe at Home program and verify their residency.

Lastly, this legislation would expand the program to apply to ongoing child custody cases, as participants are often involved in these court proceedings with their former abuser.

The Safe at Home Address Confidentiality Program is currently shielding hundreds of victims in Ohio from their perpetrators. House Bill 429 would make much needed improvements to the program to ensure they remain safe.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on House Bill 429. In the coming weeks, you will hear from experts in the field who help these victims every day. We are happy to answer any questions the Committee may have at this time.