



Chairman Hambley, Vice-Chair Patton, Ranking Member Brown, and members of the Civil Justice Committee, thank you for the opportunity to give proponent testimony on House Bill 429. This bill will make much needed improvements to Ohio's Safe at Home program -- an initiative which protects Ohioans who face threats to their safety and livelihood.

Ohio's Safe at Home Program was created by the 131st General Assembly to assist victims of domestic violence, stalking, human trafficking, rape, or sexual battery by keeping their home address confidential. Program participants are assigned a substitute address designated by the Secretary of State's Office that is intended to help victims shield their real home address from public records so perpetrators are not able to discover locations via public government documents. For example, participants can register to vote and cast an absentee ballot without their residential address being compromised.

Under current Ohio law, a government entity may not knowingly disclose a Safe at Home participant's confidential information. However, improvements in how confidential information is communicated and handled by some government entities need to be made. By listening to and working with program participants over the past year, the Secretary of State's Office has noted three main issues that need to be fixed for the safety and convenience of these survivors.

First, the Secretary of State's Office is restricted by current law to communicate on a participants' behalf with the postal service, judges, schools, and food pantries. This restriction delays and complicates delivery of critical services for participants. A school district or food pantry may be unaware of the Safe at Home program and may require verification from the Secretary of State's Office that a substitute address is valid. Without this verification, a child's enrollment in a new school district or services at a food pantry might be stalled.

Secondly, program participants involved in child custody cases can have their confidential addresses released by the court at various stages of a case. If a victim's actual address or contact information is made available to their abuser through a court filing, their safety may be in danger once again.

Lastly, there is a lack of a process for property documents, which can dissuade participants from moving or purchasing a new home. As many property records are made available to the public, participants need our help to formally communicate what information is prevented from being disclosed and keep their new address private.

House Bill 429 addresses these issues by:

1) Permitting the Secretary of State's Office to communicate on behalf of participants with their authorization to the United States Postal Service, a judge or magistrate, the BMV, a school administrator, public assistance administrators, and food pantry administrators to better facilitate services for participants. This extra protection of a victim's government

interactions will increase their confidence in seeking assistance when needed -- knowing their home address is safe.

2) Ensuring the court is notified when a program participant is engaged in a child custody case. If a party in a case requests a confidential address to be released, convincing evidence will need to be shown to the court why the release is necessary to proceed and would not put the participant or children in danger.

3) Authorizing a real property confidentiality notice for Safe at Home participants to shield their confidential information as they file with a county recorder and relevant public offices. This will give survivors confidence to improve their living situation without fear of being found by their abuser. Additionally, they will be able to assure the confidentiality of their new address if their old one has been compromised.

For the last four years, the Secretary's office has been working with the Ohio Legislature and law enforcement to ensure survivors have the confidentiality and confidence to live their lives, including exercising their right to vote. By partnering with employers and other government entities, the Safe at Home program is an essential part of a safety plan for those who need it. These survivors shouldn't have to live in fear, so let's take some commonsense steps to provide the security they need. Let's get it done.

Remember, these are some of our most vulnerable citizens, and these improvements to both government collaboration and confidentiality will help them rebuild their lives. Ohio has taken the right step forward in offering this program and now we must continue to make sure it works effectively and as promised. We can't go halfway on something as important as this.

I'd like to thank the Ohio Supreme Court, the Ohio Domestic Violence Network, and the Cleveland Legal Aid Society for their contributions to this legislation and for all the work they do on a daily basis to improve the safety and livelihoods for Ohioans.

Thank you to Representative LaRe and Representative Abrams for their work on improving this critical program. I sincerely appreciate your attention and consideration for this important legislation.