

To: House Criminal Justice Committee  
From: Jessica Combs, Ohio Crime Victim  
Date: May 18, 2020  
RE: H.B. 610 Proponent Testimony

Chairman Lang, Vice Chair Plummer, Ranking Member Leland, and members of the Ohio House Criminal Justice Committee:

Hello, everyone, my name is Jessica Combs and I am here today to offer testimony in support of House Bill 610 and share with you why this legislation is important to me and my family. As a homicide survivor, I am speaking from personal experience after navigating what seems like a never-ending criminal justice process.

My story begins back on September 4, 2016. That was the day a police officer knocked on my door and told me what would come to change my life forever. He had come to tell me that my 16-year-old son, Ronnie Bowers III, had been shot and I needed to get to the hospital.

That evening, five individuals hunted down my son and his friends as they left Alter-fest. They found my son backing out of a driveway and blocked him in. Three of them ran up to the car and one of them punched my son in the face through the window. My son managed to back out and proceeded to drive away to safety. One of the two remaining occupants in the other car, Kylen Gregory, stepped out of the car, pointed a gun, which he stole from his grandfather and subsequently loaded with stolen bullets, at Ronnie's car and pulled the trigger. The bullet went through the back windshield and hit Ronnie in the back of the head. My son was shot driving him and his friends to safety after he was chased down by a car full of people. The shooter and his accomplices drove past my son's car when they left the scene. They didn't bother to stop to check on him or even to call 911. They left and tried to hide any evidence of their involvement. They just didn't care that they hurt my son, someone they didn't even know.

Over the next few days I watched my son's condition deteriorate. Ronnie never recovered, and we had to say goodbye. I had to bury my 16-year-old son.

Next began the court battles. Three of the co-defendants, including the shooter, were minors. Two of them served about six months in a private detention center. The driver of the car was an adult, and he wasn't charged for nearly two years after my son was murdered. For the shooter, Kylen Gregory, I endured years of uncertainty of whether and how he would be held accountable for murdering my child.

The criminal justice process was arduous, lengthy, and traumatic. I had to fight constantly for my rights in both the juvenile and adult courts. On no less than four occasions, I was given the wrong information, including court dates from my advocate. I was told I would not be allowed to be present for trial, or any proceeding, because I was potentially a testifying witness. Also, in both court systems, many of the proceedings were held in chambers so neither myself nor any family or friends could be present.

For two of the juveniles, I was told the hearing would be continued, so I didn't need to come to court. Turns out, they entered pleas that day, and were sentenced. I didn't get to be present for it, speak to the court about the it, or confer with the prosecution about it.

On one occasion, I was told I would not be permitted to give an impact statement and speak about the release of two of the juveniles. Just days before the one-year anniversary of my son's death, I received a call in the evening. The next business day, first thing in the morning, a hearing would be held regarding the release of the juveniles from private custody. That's all the notice I received about the release of two of the individuals responsible for my son's death.

Even though every single one of those things impacted me, no one seemed to care about my objections. No one seemed to consider that this confusing process was made so much more hurtful by their actions. Everyone seemed content with leaving me in the dark. I was lucky enough to be referred by another homicide survivor to Ohio Crime Victim Justice Center for assistance. Ohio Crime Victim Justice Center provides free legal representation to victims of crime throughout the criminal justice process. OCVJC has been working diligently for over two years to assist me in exercising my constitutional rights as a victim.

OCVJC spoke with the prosecution regarding my rights. They began to work together to help ensure my rights were protected and enforced. Thanks to OCVJC, I could be present for court proceedings, including Kylan Gregory's trial. After much back and forth, he was bound over to the adult court system and eventually convicted of the reduced charge of reckless homicide. My family and I were able to give victim impact statements at his sentencing. OCVJC helped me with my restitution request, and I was awarded restitution at his sentencing as well.

OCVJC stood by me through the next steps, the reverse bindover process. They attended court proceedings with me, advised me of my rights, and made sure I understood the process. Once the court found he was not amenable to the juvenile justice system, we went to court again, and watched the judge impose the adult sentence of eleven years, with over three years credited for time served in the local juvenile holding facility. And yet, this isn't over. My son's murderer is appealing his case to the 2nd District Court of Appeals. His case has been set to the expedited calendar due to his age. I'm not sure how the COVID-19 pandemic will affect his case.

While I sit here and await the outcome, I do not wait alone. In addition to my loving friends and family, I have OCVJC waiting with me, to help me seek justice for my son Ronnie.

This whole process has been frustrating, painful, and difficult to comprehend. How cruel is the justice system if crime victims, who are put in this system through no fault of their own, must seek justice in the dark? That is just simply not fair. That is why I am asking you to pass House Bill 610, to help crime victims have a better experience in the process that I did.

House Bill 610 affords victims many rights that I sought, such as the right to be present and heard at proceedings, including proceedings involving the release of their offenders. If they request this right, and it is not afforded to them, the legislation affords them an enforcement mechanism, so they can reopen the hearing, appeal the rights' violation, or petition other relief from the appellate courts. This legislation will allow victims in the future to exercise their rights

and have a meaningful role in the justice system. House Bill 610 will afford victims the justice they need and deserve.

I support House Bill 610 and I hope you do too. Thank you.