**Testimony in Support of SB207**

**Felonious Assault Expansion to Include Strangulation or Suffocation**

**Sponsor Senator Stephanie Kunze**

Committee Members, as a fellow legislator, I approach you today with deep respect and appreciation for your service as part of this committee. I am here to speak in support of SB207, amending the Ohio Revised Code to expand the offense of felonious assault to include knowingly causing or attempting to cause physical harm to another person by means of strangulation or suffocation. Without a doubt, this expansion of the law is much needed.

I have a unique background where I have and currently serve as a council representative in Barberton, Ohio, while also having over 4 years’ experience as a victim advocate. During my time as an advocate, I have served over 2,000 individuals, including countless women who were strangled or suffocated during attacks from their intimate partners. The prevalence of strangulation and suffocation should absolutely not be underestimated.

I first learned about the seriousness of strangulation through training with the Ohio Attorney General’s Office, which then helped me to best serve victims who experienced strangulation and suffocation. I have been able to help these victims through education on the seriousness and effects of strangulation and suffocation, as well as coordinating forensic medical care and evaluation within 72 hours of an assault.

Today, I would like to share one specific case that will always standout in my time as an advocate. One night I was called to a local hospital for a victim of intimate partner violence. Upon arriving, I introduced myself and was then taken through the victim’s horrific story of the night proceeding. The victim and her boyfriend had been out at a local bar and had gotten in an argument, so they left. On their way home, the victim decided that she just wanted to go home for the night, but the abuser dragged her into the house and to his bedroom.

The abuser proceeded to strangle and suffocate the victim over several hours. The victim fought back, escaping out of the bedroom several times, but each time she was overpowered by the abuser and dragged back into the bedroom, even by the hair on her head. During the assault the abuser even bit the victim in several places on her body, including her face, her chest, and her finger. Understandably, the victim was in extreme crisis and terrified as we began to talk about the exam and “what’s next.” Throughout the few hours we spent at the hospital, I was able to build a rapport and gained the victim’s trust, helping her to decide to file a police report and press charges.

Unfortunately, the system failed this young woman. The abuser was charged with a misdemeanor assault because there was no sexual assault, they did not live together, and the assault didn’t “qualify” for a more serious charge. Well, as we all know if you have worked within the criminal justice field, a misdemeanor charge is often reduced or dismissed and can take months to resolve. So, the charge and consequence for this abuser’s actions dissipated, sending a message that the behavior is acceptable not only to the abuser, but also to the victim and everyone affected by this incident.

This might be just one situation, but I assure you that I’ve seen many strangulation and suffocation cases, where the abusers are charged with misdemeanors, despite the seriousness and long-term health consequences of these specific actions. You have an opportunity to save lives and change the culture surrounding strangulation and suffocation through SB207. Therefore, I am asking you to please take this opportunity to make a difference and bring SB207 to a vote and vote yes to bring it out of committee. Thank you for allowing me to testify on this important issue.

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