

Testimony on House Bill 796 Civil Justice Committee

Submitted by: Julie Womack

Chair Hambley, Vice Chair Patton, Ranking Member Brown, and members of the committee, thank you for allowing me to present this testimony in opposition to House Bill 796.

My name is Julie Womack. I am a former domestic violence prosecutor who practiced here in Columbus. I handled cases of violence against women and children on both the misdemeanor and felony level. I am currently a resident of Mason, Ohio. Thank you for taking the time to hear my testimony and consider my strong opposition to HB 796.

I am a volunteer for Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America. Founded after the Sandy Hook shooting in 2012, Moms Demand Action is a nonpartisan organization with nearly six million supporters, both mothers and others, gun owners and non-gun owners. We do not oppose guns or the Second Amendment but rather advocate for the reduction of gun violence through common-sense gun safety reforms and education.

Our laws reflect our values as a society and, for that reason, I find it hard to understand why a legislature would pass a law that will lead to an increase in gun homicides. Statistics show that states that enact Stand Your Ground laws see an increase in firearm homicide rates. In an average month, at least 30 people nationwide are killed as a result of Stand Your Ground laws. Florida saw a 32 percent increase in firearm homicide rates after they implemented Stand Your Ground laws.

When there is a clear and safe alternative to the use of deadly force, why are we not erring on the side of protecting lives? I find this especially troubling in the context of domestic violence cases. Victims of domestic violence almost always fear further injury from their abusers. They have good reason to be fearful – women in the U.S. are 21 times more likely to be killed with a gun than women in other high-income countries. In Ohio, from 2013 to 2017, 99 women were fatally shot by an intimate partner. This represents 88% of all intimate partner gun homicides in this state, compared to 81% nationwide. Speaking from my experience as a domestic violence prosecutor, I can tell you that abusers frequently claim self-defense in these cases. They will argue that the victim was the aggressor and that they were simply defending themselves. Now with Stand Your Ground, instead of having a duty to retreat in public, abusers will be able to stand their ground and use deadly force against their intimate partners. Exposing victims of domestic violence to increased threats of deadly force makes no sense and is the exact opposite of the policies that the State should be enacting.

I am also a mother of three biracial children. Another reason that I strongly oppose this legislation is because these laws have been shown to have a disproportionate impact on communities of color. When white shooters kill black victims, the resulting homicides are deemed justifiable 11 times more frequently than when the shooter is black and the victim is white. Controlling for other factors – such as who initiated the confrontation and whether or not

the victim was armed – Florida Stand Your Ground cases with minority victims are half as likely to lead to conviction compared to cases with white victims.

People often make assumptions based upon race. We live in a well-to-do neighborhood in Mason with neighbors who are professionals with college and/or advanced degrees. My son is a wonderful, caring and polite person. He does well in school and currently attends BGSU majoring in business and plays on their soccer team. He is not a threat to anyone. When he was in high school, he would sometimes babysit for our neighbors who live about six houses away, and I noticed that he would always drive to their house instead of walk. He explained to me that he didn't think it was a good idea for a black kid to be walking home late at night – he knew that people would make assumptions or could possibly draw the wrong conclusion.

We have seen this just recently with the Ahmaud Arbery case. A black man who was just out for a jog but was profiled as a danger and chased down and shot. There was a case in Rochester Hills, MI last year where a 14 year- old African-American boy missed his bus and was trying to walk to school. He knocked on a door to get directions and the homeowner pulled out a gun and shot at him – because he assumed bad intentions. This is the reality that people of color face. People make assumptions and sometimes draw the wrong conclusions – especially in areas of fear and safety. These assumptions can lead to deadly consequences. Why are we not asking people to retreat and save lives when they can safely do so? Why are we instead encouraging the taking of a life when an alternative exists? We have self-defense laws already that permit people to defend themselves – there is no need to make these changes – changes that will lead to more deaths. I strongly urge lawmakers to vote no on HB 796.