Good afternoon – Chairman Green, Ranking Member Sheehy, and members of the Ohio House Transportation and Public Safety Committee. My name is John Esterly, a resident of Columbus for twenty years, lifelong Ohioan, an operating locomotive engineer based in Columbus, and a member and officer of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers. My family has worked for the railroad for at least four generations in Ohio, including four that still work as engineers throughout the State. In my spare time, I volunteer for Operation Lifesaver, the nations recognized leader in providing the public with rail safety education. I thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today in favor of House Bill 186, the Ohio Rail Safety Bill. This bipartisan bill provides critical safety measures, not only for railroad employees like me, but for the general public.

Today I would like to address the portion of the bill that requires a two-person freight train crew in Ohio. First and foremost, a two-person crew is the status quo in the United States. The overwhelming majority of freight trains today operate with two crew members – a federally licensed conductor and a federally licensed engineer. These two individuals work together to ensure that the train makes it safely from origin to destination, in some cases traveling nearly three hundred miles in the course of their day at speeds up to sixty miles per hour. At those speeds, it can take a train two miles or more to stop.

I know several members of the Committee have direct knowledge of the daily lives of a train crew, but for those of you that don’t – think of the most recent long distance road trip you took. For me, this was a drive to Atlanta, Georgia – a trip which takes roughly nine hours. During this trip, I stopped three times for fuel. I ate lunch at one of these stops. As I drove into Georgia, I felt my eyes get heavy, and running ahead of schedule I found a rest stop and took a short nap. It goes without saying that my radio provided a constant soundtrack for this trip, and I even made several phone calls along the way. If I had to guess, this description sounds familiar to many of you.

To contrast that, the last trip I took to Indianapolis by train took the same amount of running time. On this trip, however, there were no stops for fuel. I ate my lunch on the locomotive while still remaining attentive to the signals and other conditions along the way. There is no stopping to let your eyes rest – there is no radio – and your phone must be turned off and stored in your luggage when the train is moving. Our focus is dependent entirely on our own discipline – and the other crew member.

You may hear testimony today that Positive Train Control will provide a security blanket that will solve the problem of human error. PTC is a great tool and make no mistake – it WILL improve safety. PTC is not infallible, however. As PTC has been implemented on more tack miles, we have seen significant issues with the software. Furthermore, additional technology such as PTC, Trip Optimizer (similar to cruise control and designed to save fuel), and Distributed Power (placing engines elsewhere in the train) all require the locomotive engineer to constantly monitor display screens, often causing them to look away from the track ahead. This makes the second set of eyes on the locomotive even more important.

Finally, you may hear testimony about the cost of having a second person on the rail crew. This bill does not require the rail carriers to spend any additional money – only to maintain current operations. A two-person crew has allowed the rail carriers to achieve record breaking profits and operating ratios over the past five years, and stock prices that continue to rise. A two-person crew allows safer, more efficient repair of most line-of-road train failures, which keeps trains moving – and moving trains are good for business.

As a locomotive engineer, I consider the safety of the public to be my primary function. Rail safety initiatives such as House Bill 186 provide an opportunity to improve my ability to work safely, and to provide safe rail transportation to Ohioans. Thank you again for the opportunity to speak, and I am happy to answer any questions from the Committee.