



Cecil Thomas
State Senator
9th District

Ohio Statehouse
Senate Building, Room 228
1 Capitol Square
Columbus, Ohio 43215
(614) 466-5980
Thomas@ohiosenate.gov

Committees:

- Judiciary – *Ranking Minority Member*
- Finance Subcommittee on Health and Medicaid – *Ranking Minority Member*
- Government Oversight and Reform
- Health, Human Services, and Medicaid
- Local Government, Public Safety, and Veterans Affairs
- Rules and Reference

S.J.R. 5 – Removing Slavery from the Ohio Constitution
Sponsor Testimony by Senator Cecil Thomas
Senate Government Oversight & Reform Committee
November 18, 2020

Good morning Chairman Coley and Vice Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Craig, and members of the Senate Government Oversight & Reform Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Joint Resolution 5, which would remove slavery and involuntary servitude as punishment for crime.

Article 1, Section 6 of the Ohio Constitution currently reads, *“There shall be no slavery in this state; nor involuntary servitude, unless for the punishment of crime.”*

No one in the state of Ohio should be treated like a slave, even if they have been convicted of a crime. The Ohio Constitution is a document that forms the basis of what we value as a state and is a guide for taking those values and turning them into laws. Simply put, I do not believe that slavery or involuntary servitude is something we value as Ohioans and it is why I believe the exception should be removed.

After slavery was formally abolished, the exception was used by states and industrialists who benefited and profited off of something called “convict-leasing”. The state would lease prisoners, predominately Black, to coal mines, chain gangs, and railroads for work they would not be paid for. In Texas alone, more than 3,500 prisoners died between 1866 and 1912, when lawmakers finally outlawed the practice.

Today, one could argue that states and private companies still rely on prisoners performing free or extremely low-paid labor for them. In California, the state is saved almost \$100 million a year by utilizing prisoners as volunteer firefighters. And while learning a skill or trade can help a person after they have served their time, they should be adequately compensated for that work. But that is a discussion for another bill.

As we embark on making structural changes to our laws and policies that adversely impact people of color, it is important that Ohio lawmakers stand together to eliminate this painful

reminder of a ruinous time in the history of our country. Thank you and I am happy to answer questions.