



# CRIME SURVIVORS FOR SAFETY AND JUSTICE

## **TESTIMONY TO OHIO SENATE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE FROM SONIA MATIS, CHAPTER MEMBER OF CRIME SURVIVORS FOR SAFETY AND JUSTICE**

May 15, 2019

Chair Eklund, Vice Chair Manning and members of the Committee. My name is Sonia Matis. I am a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, domestic violence and sexual assault. Today, I volunteer for a women's prison, a rape crisis center and a domestic violence organization. I am a proud member of Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice. In March 2019, I joined over 200 members of Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice for Ohio's inaugural Survivors Speak Ohio convening to share my story with legislators. I offer my support for a shift toward drug treatment and earned redemption as a pathway out of addiction. I am honored to provide written testimony in support of SB3.

Every time I enter the women's prison to speak, I am reminded that the only difference between those women and myself is that I was able to get some help. They did not get help and ended up behind bars. I can tell you from personal experience that victims of sexual assault often feel a tremendous amount of shame that cannot be washed away. Too often victims of crime who are not offered the appropriate support turn to substance use to numb the feeling of shame. National data suggests that people who experience repeat victimization are more likely to develop mental health challenges, like higher rates of depressions and PTSD. A study from the Alliance for Safety and Justice found that 8 in 10 victims of crime experience at least one symptom of trauma. I see this in the eyes of the women as we talk about faith and redemption. Women are the fastest growing population in our state's prisons. The majority of women are in prison for non-violent drug and property offenses or probation violations. Though help is not always available to victims of crime, drugs, felonies and prison often are.

I can tell you that many of Ohio's incarcerated women are the victims of a crime, and that the unaddressed trauma led them toward drug abuse, risky behavior and the justice system. These women need our support. They need treatment and on-going counseling to end the cycle, they do not need felony convictions or to be sent to state prison to become hardened criminals.

I am excited about SB3 and what it could mean for the women I work with. I appreciate that SB3 includes reclassification of minor drug possession to misdemeanor status. I do

ask the committee to consider providing people with prior minor drug possession felonies a fair opportunity at redemption by allowing them to reclassify their felonies to misdemeanors. Felony convictions for minor drug possession make it harder for the women I work with to recover and get their lives on track, whether that felony is 10 years old or 1 year old. Another major challenge these women face is probation revocations. Too many people who are honestly working towards recovery go to prison for minor mistakes. These minor mistakes result in prison sentences and this response has not helped. Instead, it diminishes all the hope these people work so hard to rebuild. I ask this committee to consider a non-prison response to minor mistakes made while on probation.

There are too many people in Ohio's prisons who should not be there. It has been my mission to help and support these women, who in many ways are just like me. SB3 will do the same. I look forward to telling the women about your efforts and soon hope to tell them about the passage of SB3 and the seeing their sense of hope restored.

Thank you.

Sonia Matis  
Chapter Member  
Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice

# #SurvivorsSpeak Ohio

## *Improving Public Safety & Support for Crime Victims*

Crime survivors from across the state of Ohio are coming together at the Statehouse for #SurvivorsSpeak to advocate for policies that prevent crime, better support survivors, families and communities, and reduce wasteful incarceration. #SurvivorsSpeak elevates the voices of diverse crime survivors to ensure their experiences shape public safety and justice policies. Survivors of crime experience significant challenges to recovering, with at-least 8 in 10 reporting that they experience at least one symptom of trauma following an incident. Most victims do not get the kind of help needed to heal: one survey found two out of every three crime victims report receiving no help following the incident. Only 8 percent of all victims of violence receive direct assistance from a victim service agency, and this already low number drops to 4 percent when the crime is unreported— the case for more than half of all violent crimes.

Ohio's leaders have worked with crime survivors in the past to advance important solutions. Crime survivors are calling on Ohio policymakers to continue their partnership, so policies that meet the needs of crime victims and improve community safety are enacted.

### **Providing Consistent Funding for Trauma Recovery Centers**

Unaddressed trauma from violence can lead to addiction, negative health outcomes, unemployment, revictimization, and crime. This can limit someone's chances of getting and keeping a job and housing, and have costly consequences for both the individual and the community. Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice worked with then-Attorney General Mike Dewine and leaders to help establish [Trauma Recovery Centers](#) in Ohio. There are now eight of these centers in the state delivering a transformational new model of care that has been shown to be more effective than traditional services in helping crime survivors heal. Crime survivors are now advocating for consistent and stable state funding of Trauma Recovery Centers.

### **Reducing Barriers to Victim's Services**

Ohio's victim compensation program can provide important support to survivors of violence and their loved ones. Yet under current law, individuals and families can face roadblocks to accessing resources from this program. Crime survivors are calling for expanded access to victim compensation funds for family members who experience severe trauma as a result of violence, but who are not the direct victims. They are also calling for changes to law that remove barriers to accessing victim compensation based on a past conviction. Crime victims, and their families, can often be denied access to this program based on an old conviction, even if the offense is a decade old. Ohio can reduce the barriers to needed funds for victims by reducing the lookback period for conviction-related disqualification from 10 years to five years. Children, who are victims, should no longer be denied support because they have a parent living with a past conviction.

# #SurvivorsSpeak Ohio

## *Improving Public Safety & Support for Crime Victims*

### **Shifting to Drug Treatment & Earned Redemption As the Pathway Out of Addiction**

Crime survivors support policies that address the root causes that perpetuate the cycle of crime. Ohio is facing an addiction crisis. Continuing to rely on felony convictions and prison will not address the problem. People are cycling in and out of the prison system, returning to communities without real rehabilitation, and the cycle of addiction continues. Resources that could be better spent on prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation are instead being used to fund an overcrowded prison system. Crime survivors support legislation that would ensure an effective approach to addressing addiction. Ohio can respond to this crisis in a way that makes communities healthier and safer by: 1) reclassifying minor drug possession offenses from felonies to misdemeanors and treating addiction as a public health issue; 2) applying reclassification retroactively, so the barriers to successful addiction recovery and life stability are removed; and 3) reducing incarceration from technical violations of probation.

### **Who We Are**

Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice is a national network of crime survivors joining together to create healing communities and shape public policy. It is a flagship project of the Alliance for Safety and Justice. With over 25,000 members and growing across the country, Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice is building a movement to heal together and promote policies that help the people and communities most harmed by crime and violence. It currently has active state and local chapters in California, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Texas. Each chapter works with communities impacted by crime to support survivors and advocate for smarter justice priorities.

### **About Our Work With Survivors**

For too long, the voices and experiences of diverse crime survivors have been ignored in public safety policymaking. Despite tremendous increases in spending, most justice systems have failed to adequately meet the needs of survivors and stop the cycle of crime. Instead of putting the needs of survivors first, billions of dollars have been wasted on ineffective policies.

Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice recognizes that survivors deserve a safety and justice system that works - one that prioritizes prevention, accountability and recovery from harm. Through Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice, victims of crime – particularly from communities most affected by crime, violence, and incarceration – come together to heal and take action. We share our stories, honor our loved ones and ourselves, and create healing communities to advocate for policies that prevent crime, better support survivors, families and communities, and reduce wasteful incarceration.

### **Learn More**

To learn more about our efforts, visit the website at [www.cssj.org](http://www.cssj.org) or contact us at:

Email: [chapters@safeandjust.org](mailto:chapters@safeandjust.org)

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/cssjustice/](http://www.facebook.com/cssjustice/)

Twitter: [@CSSJustice](https://twitter.com/CSSJustice)

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