

Dear Chairperson LeRd, Vice Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Leland and Committee Members,

Thank you for receiving my written testimony in opposition to HB 22. I am a Cleveland resident and recent graduate of the Bloomberg School of Public Health at Johns Hopkins University, where I received my Masters in Public Health in December 2020. I have participated in many peaceful protests in Ohio, including interfaith vigils, sit-ins, marches, and picket lines. As both a citizen who may choose to exercise my First Amendment rights to speech and assembly, and a public health researcher, I am deeply opposed to any bills that seek to suppress or penalize peaceful assembly and expression, including HB 22.

Adding felony penalties to peaceful activities like throwing glitter or confetti is an overly punitive approach that only provides fuel for further antagonism and mistrust between communities and the police. This is not the way forward. The language of the new felony activity in this bill is subjective and will be even more so in the context of a large gathering of citizens. There are already ways to prosecute rioting and assaults on police officers. There is no need to escalate tensions the way that HB 22 would do.

From a public health perspective, increasing fines and prison time only exacerbates the negative health impacts - and financial costs to taxpayers - that come out of our already overcrowded prisons, along with increases in chronic diseases such as hypertension and diabetes linked to higher rates of incarceration, criminalization, and debt.