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Joint Sponsor Testimony, House Bill 511

May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Good afternoon, Chairman LaRe, Vice Chair White, Ranking Member Leland, and all other members of the Criminal Justice Committee. I am here today to talk about HB 511, which is a bill to amend Ohio Revised Code sections 149.43 and 5149.10 in order to require electronic recordings of all parole board hearings to be made and to be made “public records” under the Public Records Law. I am proud to be primary sponsor of this bill along with my esteemed colleague, Representative Brian Stewart.

We want to bring transparency to Ohio Parole Board hearings. The current system operates primarily in secrecy. This is stated in the Ohio Parole Board’s Handbook of January 2019 –“Although the outcome of all parole hearings is public information, institutional parole release hearings and deliberations are closed to the public.” The public cannot attend any of these hearings or meetings where the board discusses the cases and decisions. The public does not have access to any kind of transcripts, recordings, or other records from these hearings and deliberations. All the public has access to are the final decisions made by the board. The public gets to see the final decision but not the process by which the decision was made. Full board meetings are currently shown live on The Ohio Channel but are not stored and are not accessible after the hearing has completed. In court proceedings, there is either a court reporter present who transcribes proceedings or a recording is made. People have the right to request those transcripts or recordings of those proceedings. In this bill, we would require that Ohio Parole Board hearings be recorded and stored and that people could request these records through the Ohio Public Records Act. Additionally, if the party, person, or entity wishes to have the recording transcribed they can do so at their own expense.

I believe transparency in government is essential. As Abraham Lincoln so eloquently said, we are a government “of the people, by the people. For the people.”

Citizens deserve to know how their government operates. Accountability in government starts with access to information on how it operates and how it makes decisions. Openness builds trust. Openness builds confidence that the actions that are made in the public's name are correct and truly in the best interest of the public. If the public can see how and why the Board came to a decision, we can create more confidence in the system.

People from any angle in a case could benefit from increased transparency in Parole Board decision making. A victim's family under current procedures would know the Parole Board's decision but they might also like to know exactly how that decision came about and what specific pieces of information were taken into account. An inmate might like to know what specific actions they took that led to their parole being denied. Members of the Parole Board could benefit by showing the public that they did their due diligence in their process of decision making. Increased transparency can be beneficial to everyone.

Openness doesn't necessarily mean access to everything. We know that privacy and safety are a concern when talking about such sensitive matters and this bill makes allowances for that. We care deeply about victims and their families and we want to ensure we protect them as needed through this process. This bill specifically states that identifying information of any victim and their immediate family is not included in public record, including their name, date of birth, phone numbers, email addresses and more.

We also acknowledge that HB 511 is a working document. There may be other pieces of information that should not be made available to the public that are not currently included in this bill. We welcome thoughts and concerns that members of this committee may have on this bill. We want this bill to be the best version it can be.

When we talk about parole, we are literally talking about the difference between freedom and imprisonment of our fellow citizens. Let's make sure we are getting this right. Let's have transparency in Ohio Parole Board deliberations so that we the people can be sure that the right and fair decision on whether someone is granted or denied parole is made. Please vote yes to HB 511. Now I would like to pass to my joint sponsor Representative Stewart for his testimony.