

House Infrastructure and Rural Development Committee

House Bill 101 – Proponent Testimony

March 3, 2021

Sheriff Michael E Heldman
Hancock County

Chairman Stoltzfus, Vice Chair Dean, Ranking Member Brown and Members of the House Infrastructure and Rural Development Committee. My name is Michael Heldman, Sheriff of Hancock County. I am here today representing the Buckeye State Sheriff's Association serving as the Committee Chair of the Community Corrections Committee. I also currently serve as the Chair of the Ohio Jail Advisory Board. Having served in Law Enforcement and Corrections for the past 49 years and as Sheriff for the last 24 years of one of Ohio's full-service jails, I want to take a moment to talk with you about House Bill 101.

Conceptually we would like to express our support for House Bill 101 as a remedy to a problem that has existed in Ohio's jails. We would however, respectfully request that additional discussions and revisions be considered in providing for long term solutions specific to the replacement and renovation of our aging county jails. We are willing to work collaboratively with the committee and offer practitioner expertise to better understand the inner workings of the language, each other's roles in application of the language and in reaching a long-term solution that has forever lasting impact. We are grateful to the bill sponsors, Ohio House Representative Jason Stephens and Representative Jay Edwards and the 22 co-sponsors for bringing this legislation forward.

Approximately one third of Ohio's eighty-four full service, regional and minimum-security county jails were constructed and opened prior to 1988, which was at a time when incarceration rates varied greatly from today's incarceration rates. From the 1980's until approximately 2003 the State of Ohio assisted counties by providing capital funding for jail construction and renovation through biennial capital appropriations. This dedicated capital funding greatly assisted Ohio's county jails by providing them a very unique opportunity to construct new or renovate an existing jail in meeting the needs of the local criminal justice system. Without those dedicated capital funds construction and renovation would have never taken place and as counties we would be faced with a much larger issue today. It is imperative that the issue of capital funding for jail construction or renovation of existing facilities, through capital appropriations, be considered so the we do not end up with dilapidated, overcrowded and constitutionally deficient jails placing the life, health and safety of jail staff and those incarcerated at risk.

Hancock County experienced the benefit of State of Ohio biennial capital funding in the mid 1980's. At the time capital funding became available, Hancock County was operating a county jail that was built in 1879 to serve as both a jail and the Sheriff's residence. In the 1980's we faced overcrowded conditions, a deploring physical plant, transported inmates all over Ohio for housing, faced maintenance issues, fire and health code violations, had no programming, faced federal civil lawsuits and had nothing more to offer than a bed. Conditions were unsafe for our staff and inmates. Because of the availability of funds that were made available through biennial capital funding in the 1980's, we were able to construct a 98-bed full service facility which opened for occupancy in 1989 and remains in operation today.

Unfortunately, these issues are not unique to Hancock County. Problems with aging and inadequate facilities continue to exist in counties of all sizes and economic status.

I am here today to share that like the 1980's, today's county jails have become overwhelmed. The county jail is one of the most critical assets of the criminal justice system. Today's inmates have far greater needs and require more upon incarceration and even more at the time of release. Ohio's county jails historically have faced many adversities. Today we are faced with the county jail being utilized as stabilization units for those with mental illness, facilities for those who are impacted by substance use disorder in battling the ever-crippling opioid epidemic and illegal drug use, facilities for those who have been victims of a multitude of traumas to include verbal, physical, sexual and those who have been victims of human trafficking, or that we would witness a continual and ever-increasing female population that brings a very different, unique and diverse set of needs.

Ohio's jails were not constructed to properly address the needs of today's jail populations. Sheriffs are concerned that the ability of the county jail to perform its mission within the criminal justice system is currently jeopardized which requires a collaborative approach between Sheriffs, the legislature and county officials. Jails are also faced with compliance requirements governed by the Standards for Jails in Ohio while operating aging, overcrowded and inadequate facilities, trying to overcome the above-mentioned adversities, creating greater challenges for many.

The times have changed, people have changed and those we incarcerate have a greater need than those we incarcerated in years past. In serving today's jail population, jails must be more specialized when constructing a new or renovating an existing jail, so that we can better focus on housing and managing the needs of the mentally ill, those with substance use disorder, those who have been exposed to trauma and human trafficking and the increasing female population. It is realized that Ohio county jails will have to change by adding specialized programming, case management, discharge planning to lessen jail recidivism while increasing utilization of evidence-based screening tools that help us to better determine individual programming needs, increase success once released and ultimately reduce crime, to name a few. We cannot do this alone and we cannot do this without additional state capital funding.

House Bill 101 will help create a funding mechanism to address the needs of the county jails at a very critical time. Helping to overcome capacity challenges, salvaging potential crisis on the horizon and in increasing inmate needs we as Sheriff's can more effectively manage and maintain the safety and security of our employees, those incarcerated, our facilities and the communities which we serve.

Chairman Stoltzfus, and members of the Committee, thank you for allowing me this opportunity to testify and to conceptually support House Bill 101. I would be pleased to answer any questions that you may have.