



SB 288
Interested Party Testimony
Wendy Tarr
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Dear Chairman Manning, Vice-Chair McColley, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony for the Good Samaritan provisions of SB 288. My name is Wendy Tarr and I am the Director of the Vincentian Ohio Action Network (VOAN), an organization formed out of a partnership with St. Vincent de Paul to focus on addressing root causes of poverty. Our organization interfaces with all cross-sections of our community through our Think Tanks on Poverty, our reentry arm called Accompanying Returning Citizens with Hope (ARCH), our membership in the Central Ohio Restored Citizens' Collaborative, and programming conducted inside of ODRC institutions.

Through our work in the community, VOAN often encounters Ohioans impacted by substance use disorder who will be impacted by the Good Samaritan provisions of SB 288. This is important legislation because the opportunity to save a life is one of the highest calls of duty any member of our community, a friend, or a family member can answer. We are incredibly grateful for your work, Chairman Manning, to expand current laws to include drug paraphernalia, which was left out in the previously passed legislation. We believe this is a common sense change and it will help save many more lives. As education around this bill is provided to at risk communities we are confident we will see positive impact.

However, I do support a few additional changes that should be made to ensure more lives can be saved from the policy change. By removing the limitation of how many times an individual can save a life, those closest to the problems can be empowered to intervene, regardless of the number of times they have accessed Good Samaritan immunity. We want every citizen to be able to answer that call whether it is one time or twenty-one times. We know from our work in the community that drug use, drug abuse, and drug addiction are not a linear path to sobriety. Some have multiple brushes with overdose or near death situations before they find motivation to begin recovery.

An additional opportunity to expand the positive impact of this bill is to bring these same Good Samaritan provisions to those serving a period of community control. As previously mentioned VOAN operates a reentry program called ARCH. Through ARCH, we are in constant contact with men and women working toward economic, mental, and recovery stability as they continue their journey through post-release and community control. These journeys are not perfect, and we would like to see Ohioans in this category be able to receive the same protection if they are in a situation where they need to seek medical intervention to save a life.

In recent years, experts and reputable researchers from far and wide such as the National Institutes of Health and the Pew Research Center have validated what VOAN and ARCH see everyday. Those with justice involvement and who are impoverished are hit the hardest by overdose. In Franklin County alone, Black men are 2.5 times more likely to be arrested than their white counterparts. When you couple that with the tripling of

overdoses among this same minority community, it is easy to see why including those with recent justice involvement is necessary. Individuals on community control are aware of the liability they face if they have contact with law enforcement, fail a drug screen, or are indicted for a new charge. Despite the efforts of many to improve their lives during reentry, we also know relapse happens. Individuals in post-release control face stressors like maintaining employment and dealing with mental health symptoms that can debilitate their reentry. By restricting those that may receive immunity to those NOT on community control or post-release control, we restrict some of the most directly-impacted individuals who can be just as effective and just as “Good” a “Samaritan.” Quite frankly, I believe that any restriction to this Good Samaritan provision will cost our state precious lives that could be avoided.

Senate Bill 288 has an immense amount of potential across many different aspects of the social determinants of health. We applaud and wholeheartedly support the expansions already included in this first iteration as it pertains to our current Good Samaritan laws. I encourage the consideration of the two key expansions outlined in my testimony as it will maximize the effectiveness of this statute and position Ohio to be a leader in smart justice reforms that are both reasonable and driven by data. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you and I would be happy to answer any questions this committee may have.

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