



Chair Gavarone, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Maharath, and members of the Senate Local Government and Elections Committee, thank you for the opportunity to give proponent testimony on House Bill 93. This bill will make much needed improvements to Ohio's Safe at Home program, which protects Ohioans who face severe threats to their safety and livelihood.

The Safe at Home Program was created by the 131st General Assembly to assist victims of domestic violence, stalking, human trafficking, rape, or sexual battery by keeping their home address confidential in the public forum. Program participants are assigned a substitute address designated by the Secretary of State's Office that is intended to help victims shield their real home address from public records, so perpetrators are not able to discover their location via public government documents. For example, participants can register to vote and cast an absentee ballot without their residential address being compromised.

Under current Ohio law, a government entity may not knowingly disclose a Safe at Home participant's confidential information. However, improvements in how confidential information is communicated and handled by some government branches need to be made. By listening and working with program participants, my office has noted three main issues that need to be fixed for the safety of these survivors.

First, the Secretary of State is restricted by current law from communicating on a participants' behalf with the postal service, judges, schools, or food pantries. This restriction delays and complicates delivery of critical services for participants. A school district or food pantry may be unaware of the Safe at Home program and may require verification from the Secretary of State's Office that a substitute address is valid. Without this verification, a child's enrollment in a new school district or services at a food pantry could be stalled.

Secondly, program participants involved in child custody cases can have their confidential addresses released by the court at various stages of a case. If a victim's actual address or contact information is made available to their abuser through a court filing, their participation in the program is futile.

Lastly, there is a lack of process for real property documents, which can dissuade participants from moving or purchasing a new home. As many property records are

made available to the public, participants need our help to formally communicate what information is prevented from being disclosed and keep their new address private.

House Bill 93 addresses these issues by:

- 1) Permitting my office to communicate on behalf of participants, with their authorization, to the United States Postal Service, a judge or magistrate, the BMV, a school administrator, public assistance administrators, and food pantry administrators. This extra protection of a victim's government interactions will increase their confidence in seeking assistance when needed, knowing their home address is safe.

- 2) Developing a better process for program participants who are involved in a child custody case by requiring notice to be given that their confidential address has been requested. Convincing evidence will need to be shown to the court as to why the request is necessary, and demonstrating that it does not put the participant or children in danger.

- 3) Authorizing a real property confidentiality notice for Safe at Home participants to shield their confidential information as they file with a county recorder and other relevant public offices. This will give victims confidence to move forward with improving their living situation by removing the fear of their address becoming public.

In recent years, my office has worked with the Ohio Legislature and law enforcement to ensure victims of domestic abuse can safely live their lives – including by exercising their right to vote. The Safe at Home program has become an essential component of a safety plan for those in need because, simply put, protecting address confidentiality helps keep victims safe so they and their families can grow and prosper.

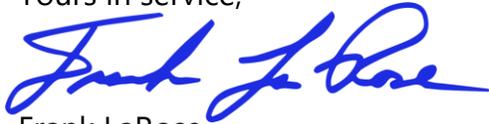
The improvements outlined here will provide more security for some of Ohio's most vulnerable citizens. Ohio has taken a positive first step in offering the Safe at Home program, and now we must continue to make improvements and ensure that it lives up to its promise. A version of this legislation was introduced in the last General Assembly and received bipartisan support. It was voted out of the House unanimously and favorably reported out of Senate committee. Unfortunately, it did not make it to the

floor for a vote before the end of the year. I encourage the General Assembly to work towards swift passage of this legislation.

I'd like to thank the Ohio Supreme Court, the Ohio Domestic Violence Network, and the Cleveland Legal Aid Society for their contributions to this legislation and for their work to improve the safety and livelihoods of Ohioans. I'd also like to offer my gratitude for our partners at the county level who are instrumental in protecting Safe at Home participant's information.

Thank you to Representative Abrams and Representative LaRe for your work on improving this critical program.

Yours in service,



Frank LaRose

Ohio Secretary of State