



Chair Abrams, Vice Chair Williams, Ranking Member Brown, and members of the House Criminal Justice Committee, thank you for affording me the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 366, the Fight Organized Retail Crime & Empower Law Enforcement (FORCE) Act.

My name is Alex Boehnke and I serve as the Vice President of Legislative & Corporate Affairs at the Ohio Council of Retail Merchants. The Council proudly represents over 7,000 retailers across the great state of Ohio, from the largest retailers in the world to family-owned businesses on main street.

I come before you today to discuss the scourge of organized retail crime (ORC) which is having a perverse effect on our retailers, their associates, their customers, and our communities. I am proud to be joined by retailers who shortly will describe for you the impact that organized retail crime has had on their businesses and how efforts like the FORCE Act can be part of the solution.

First, we should be clear about what organized retail crime is not. It is not petty shoplifting or a case of a desperate individual stealing out of need. We do not have an interest, nor do our members, in locking up or punishing individuals who make a one-off mistake or find themselves in unique situations where they feel they have no choice but to commit theft. Our focus remains on large-scale theft rings that operate across municipalities and states, committing targeted thefts on retailers. That is what constitutes organized retail crime. It represents an annual loss of \$2-3 billion in economic activity to Ohio. The resulting impacts are store closures, job loss, and communities feeling less safe.

The FORCE Act represents practical and impactful solutions gathered from law enforcement, loss prevention executives, industry leaders, and the Ohio Attorney General. It creates a retail theft advisory council comprised of industry stakeholders who will provide guidance, education, and information to the Office of Organized Crime Investigations Commission (OCIC). In addition, the bill creates a standing retail theft taskforce that will assist local communities with compiling evidence, conducting investigations, providing equipment and other resources that will build cases and directly lead to successful prosecutions. The FORCE Act also makes statutory changes that update our laws to assist prosecutors with aggregating offenses and establishing clear patterns of criminal behavior, separating petty theft from organized retail crime.

Through the passage of the FORCE Act, Ohio can once again be a leader in combating organized retail crime. In 2008, Ohio led the way by passing Senate Bill 320, sponsored by Sen. Bill Seitz, which tied organized retail crime to RICO statutes. Just two years ago, this very body voted overwhelmingly to pass the INFORM Act, which was signed into law by Governor DeWine. That bill, now federal law, requires online marketplaces to verify sellers on their platform, which has reduced the ease of selling stolen and counterfeit goods online. With your help passing the FORCE Act, Ohio can continue to set an example for fighting organized retail crime and protecting our retailers and their customers.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 366, the FORCE Act. I would like to thank Rep. Ghanbari for his leadership on this crucial issue. You will now hear from several of our members, including a leading loss prevention executive, Bryan Lindsay (Walgreens). Bryan has a wealth of knowledge and experience on the subject of organized retail crime. I encourage you to take advantage of his presence here today. Before turning it over to them, I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.