



6/14/2024

Chairwoman Abrams, Vice Chair Williams, and Ranking Member Brown, thank you, on behalf of CATCH Court and the survivors we know and love, for allowing me to provide proponent testimony on Senate Bill 214, which expands expungement of eligible offenses for human trafficking survivors. My name is Gwen England. I have been working in the criminal legal system for 15 years. Over the last 9 years I have facilitated CATCH Court, a specialized docket in Franklin County certified by the Supreme Court of Ohio to serve survivors of human trafficking that have been identified in our criminal legal system. The information that I will be presenting in my written testimony is specific to my experiences working closely with hundreds of survivors and law enforcement in the setting of the judicial system, but I cannot emphasize enough that this is just one argument as to why the passing of this bill is so essential.

When CATCH was first established in 2009, we required defendants to have a solicitation conviction to access the program. In working closely with victims, we have learned that many who enter the criminal legal system do not enter with a solicitation conviction, but rather a variety of other chargers. For this reason, we expanded our criteria for admission into the docket. Currently, over half of our docket is women who have felony offenses, many of which do not have a soliciting offense in their history.

In the State of Ohio, we have learned and evolved around this issue. Law enforcement responses have evolved, our legal responses have evolved, specialized dockets and other resources for this population have evolved. While the original expungement legislation for trafficking victims met the need of the time, we have become painfully aware of its shortcomings. We now know that the predication of expungement on a solicitation conviction is unintentionally reductive and exclusionary to an enormous number of survivors. Amending the current expungement bill to be more inclusive of identified trafficking victims, not only is beneficial to the survivors themselves, but I would argue contributes largely to the safety and thriving of our community by offering a critical step in combating human trafficking in the state of Ohio. By supporting a survivor's desire to reintegrate into society we bolster opportunities for them to earn a livable wage and have safe housing which leads to a decrease in their vulnerabilities that could foster further exploitation.

I leave with you a few of the many examples that I have witnessed through working directly with survivors in the criminal legal system. Recently, a prior graduate of CATCH Court reached out to me asking if the human trafficking detective that found her 5 years ago could retrospectively charge her with soliciting so that she could access expungement. Since graduation, this woman has juggled full time motherhood, work, and college. However, she has also been denied employment repeatedly, and was extremely limited on her area of study due to what kind of job she could get after graduation and struggled to find housing for herself and her 3 children because of her felonies. The detective that found her successfully identified this woman as a trafficking victim and as such he correctly didn't charge her with solicitation. However, his correct action is now negatively impacting her life and the life of her children, as she cannot escape the other criminal charges that were incurred during her time being exploited. In another instance, this past year in

CATCH we had two women with felonies in our docket who were identified as victims on separate federal human trafficking cases. Their testimonies were utilized to put these traffickers behind bars. Despite their cooperation on the case and the bravery they demonstrated these women cannot access expungement. They cannot fully live the life they deserve because of their criminal records. Our peer support for CATCH Court, Natasha Cooper, who is also providing testimony and who also graduated our program, was a victim on the Mearan case out of Portsmouth, Ohio- she also is not eligible for expungement as it stands today.

The reasoning to expand this bill is incredibly clear. In order to best support the success of trafficking victims following their victimhood, we must prioritize offering them expungement of charges that occur during their victimization. These survivors support our legal system in the prosecution of State and Federal human trafficking cases through their testimony and cooperation. In turn, they are often denied access to expungement. We cannot acknowledge survivors' victimhood for a conviction of traffickers and then denounce their victimization for the purposes of expungement. Our state must rectify this juxtaposition and this bill will move us in that direction. Ohio has been a pioneer in our nation for our awareness, education, and responses to human trafficking. This is another opportunity for our great state to be trailblazers in the effort to combat this critical issue.

Thank you for your consideration in support of this bill.

Sincerely,

Gwen England

Gwen England
CATCH Court Program Leader
Franklin County Municipal Court
375 S. High St.
Columbus, OH. 43215