

Chair Abrams, Vice Chair Williams, Ranking Member Brown, and members of the House Criminal Justice Committee. Thank you for allowing me to testify today in support of HB 441.

My name is Kelly Thomas and I am a parole officer for the State of Ohio serving the Akron Region.

Today, I stand before you not only as a representative of the Adult Parole Authority, but as someone who has spent the last 15 years dedicated to ensuring the safety and rehabilitation of those under our supervision. I stand here before you today 8 months pregnant, because I believe the urgency of this issue cannot wait. As I prepare to bring new life into the world, I do so with the hope of watching my children grow and being there for the milestones in their lives. But that hope is tempered by the reality that my colleagues and I face each day in our work.

As Parole Officers, we face some of the most challenging responsibilities in law enforcement. We carry firearms, execute arrests, serve warrants, and conduct home visits in some of the most unpredictable, unsecure and dangerous environments possible. Every single individual we supervise is a convicted felon. We are tasked with the responsibility of protecting the public, while simultaneously attempting to reduce recidivism by helping those we serve become productive members of society. The roles are often conflicting and as well as mentally taxing. We work alongside local, state, and federal law enforcement officers, who share many of the same duties. However, while they can often retire after 20 or 25 years of service, we are expected to continue in these high-stress roles, working well beyond that, well into our later years.

In my office alone, in the past 15 years- two officers have passed before they eligible to retire, another took his own life, and another chose to leave the agency after 20 years of service due to mental burnout. These are not isolated incidents. Across Ohio, we are facing a crisis of burnout, emotional trauma, and physical strain. This does not account for the dozens who have left for better opportunities with better retirement. This is simply not sustainable.

As it stands, nearly half of Ohio's Parole Officers will be eligible for retirement within the next five years. What does this mean for the safety of our communities? What does it mean for our ability to ensure public safety and the success of those we supervise in the face of such a significant loss of experience? These are not hypothetical questions, these are urgent, real challenges we face every day.

I live in the community I serve. My commitment goes beyond professional duty. I am personally invested in my family's safety, in the well-being of the people I supervise, and in the future of the communities where we all live and raise our children. We are often told that the work we do is essential to the safety of Ohioans, but when it comes to providing the support and recognition we need to continue this vital work, we are often left to fend for ourselves.

House Bill 441 is not just a piece of legislation. It is a lifeline for those of us on the front lines, facing real life mental, physical, and emotional challenges each day. This bill recognizes the sacrifices we make and provides the critical support we so desperately need. It offers us the promise of timely retirement, an essential incentive to remain in the field, and crucial protection for those who have dedicated their lives to serving Ohioans.

Without these measures, we risk losing the experience and institutional knowledge that is vital to the stability of our system. Worse yet, we risk creating a cycle where future Parole Officers, faced with the same challenges we encounter daily, leave the profession too soon, creating a revolving door of constant turnover, where positions at the Adult Parole Authority are viewed as stepping stones to better

opportunities, rather than viable careers. This will be detrimental to the communities we serve, and to the safety of the state.

As I stand before you today, I ask you to consider not just the statistics and facts, but the faces behind them. Think of the officers who have died while in service, the ones who are struggling, and the ones like me, who want to continue this work, not just for ourselves, but for our families, our colleagues, and the people of Ohio but are desperately grasping for an incentive to do so.

House Bill 441 offers hope. It offers the recognition and support we need to continue the critical work that ensures the safety of our state. I urge you to pass this bill, for the future of Ohio's Parole Officers, for our families, and for the communities we protect and serve.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Kelly Thomas