



## Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel

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**Before  
The Ohio House  
Government Oversight Committee**

**Proponent Testimony on House Bill 257  
By  
Angela O'Brien, Deputy Consumers' Counsel**

**On Behalf of the  
Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel**

**October 31, 2023**

Hello Chair Peterson, Vice-Chair Thomas, Ranking Member Humphrey, and Committee members. I hope you and your colleagues are well.

Consumers' Counsel Willis and I thank you and the bill sponsors (Representatives Hoops and Claggett) for this opportunity to provide written testimony in support of House Bill 257. We offer a slight amendment to the bill to clarify that the existing \$150 stipends to the OCC Board members for attending board meetings in person (usually every two months) shall be paid for attending the virtual meetings allowed under the bill.

OCC was created in 1976 as the statutory representative of residential utility consumers. The Consumers' Counsel's services to Ohioans are related to their services from electric, natural gas, telephone, and water utilities that are regulated by the PUCO.

The nine-member bi-partisan OCC Governing Board is comprised of representatives from the areas of family farmers, labor and residential consumers (with three members from each area). The members of the OCC board are appointed by the Attorney General with the advice and consent of the Ohio Senate. The OCC board members are essentially volunteers. OCC Chair Watkins travels from Lima Ohio to attend the board meetings; other board members travel from as far as Toledo, Marysville, and Newark to attend in person board meetings.

House Bill 257 allows public bodies, like the OCC Governing Board, to conduct important public business virtually instead of in person. During COVID, under the temporary authority provided, we were able to successfully use virtual meetings to conduct business, while complying with Ohio's Sunshine Laws. Remote meetings contributed to greater participation and more efficient use of our board members' time. It worked! HB 257 would permanently extend the use of virtual meetings.

And HB 257 seems to allow the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio to hold local public hearings remotely for the taking of testimony by members of the public.

That is something OCC has sought for its consumers, at times with little success. Recently OCC, with the support of Advocates for Basic Legal Equality, Community Legal Aid, Legal Aid Society of Cleveland, the Ohio Poverty Law Center and Pro Seniors, requested virtual public hearings on the FirstEnergy \$1.4 billion rate increase request. The PUCO denied OCC's request.

It is important that the public be given a convenient opportunity to have their voices heard by their state utility regulator, the PUCO, regarding utility proposals to increase rates. In-person public hearings present attendance challenges for some people. There are obstacles such as jobs, health challenges, mobility issues, childcare, eldercare, and transportation limitations among other things. These obstacles remain even after the pandemic. Ohioans should be given a choice by their state government to participate and testify remotely.

HB 257 makes clear that Ohio's Sunshine Laws will continue to be followed when remote meetings or hearings are conducted. The much needed transparency and openness in public decision making will be preserved by provisions in the bill.

As noted, we support HB 257 but ask for consideration of an amendment. An amendment is needed to clarify that the existing \$150 stipends to the OCC Board members for attending meetings in person shall be paid for virtual attendance allowed under the bill. The amendment would modify R.C. 4911.17 by changing one sentence:

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"Members of the board shall be compensated at the rate of one hundred fifty dollars per board meeting attended in person or attended in compliance with R.C. 121.221(B), not to exceed one thousand two hundred dollars per year."

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of HB 257.