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HB 157 Sponsor Testimony

Chair Wiggam, Vice Chair Dean, Ranking Member Brennan, and members of the State and Local Government Committee thank you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony for HB 157. The goal of this bill is to create a Hate Crimes Bureau within the Attorney General's Office and will authorize the Attorney General to prosecute hate crimes.

This bill would allow us to more aggressively address these types of crime by allowing the Hate Crimes Bureau to conduct independent investigations when sufficient cause exists. For the purposes of this bill, the definition of hate crime is consistent with the federal level definition which reads as follows: "A crime motivated by, or that manifests evidence of, prejudice based on actual or perceived race, color, gender and gender identity, religion, national origin, ethnicity, disability, or sexual orientation". Furthermore, the bill includes language that allows the Hate Crimes Bureau to offer resources to assist local, state, and federal law enforcement partners. It also mandates that the Attorney General is obligated to respond to every credible tip or report.

The need for this bill was made clear during the COVID-19 pandemic when hate crimes reached a 12-year high according to statistics compiled by the Department of Justice. In 2022, there were 528 hate crimes reported in Ohio, according to the FBI. However, this data may not be giving us a full picture of the extent to which hate crimes are committed in our state as not every law enforcement agency in Ohio reports their statistics to the FBI because the hate crime reporting program is voluntary. Furthermore, the Department of Justice estimates that only about one third of hate crime victims ever report their experience to law enforcement. I know this because of all the times Asian friends would mention how people had harassed them or yelled go back to your country. Obviously that is verbal harassment but verbal harassment is often in conjunction with physical violence. So, the data gap could be bridged by creating a specific office at the state level to coordinate reporting across the state. This would allow us to understand the scale of this issue and address it head-on.

More recently, we clearly saw the need for a Hate Crimes Bureau when several weeks ago, just a short drive away from the Statehouse, a group of neo-Nazis marched through the Short North. This hatred should be universally condemned, and as legislators, passing this bill is a way to show that hate has no home in our state. Thank you to Chair Wiggam, Vice Chair Dean, Ranking Member Brennan, and members of the State and Local Government Committee for allowing me to speak about the importance of this bill.

