



**Senate Judiciary Committee
Proponent Testimony for House Bill 161
Davina Cooper, Director of Rural Services
Women Helping Women
April 17th, 2024**

Chair Manning, Vice Chair Reynolds, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee:

My name is Davina Cooper, and I am the Director of Rural Services at Women Helping Women (WHW). WHW is a community-based agency that provides prevention and education services to empower the community, along with 24/7 crisis support, advocacy, and rape crisis services to survivors of Intimate Partner Violence, Sexual Assault, Teen Dating Violence, and Stalking in Adams County, Brown County, Butler County, Clermont, and Hamilton County.

Intimate Partner Violence is a public health epidemic that impacts the lives of survivors, their children, family members, and the community. One of the many barriers we see survivors of Intimate Partner Violence face exist because of Ohio's spousal exemption for sex offenses. As a survivor centered and trauma competent agency, we train and utilize unconditional belief for survivors. Telling a survivor "I believe you" is a powerful statement. Ohio's spousal exemption does not provide the ability for married survivors to feel safe or believed.

As the Rape Crisis Center in 5 counties, WHW has seen the firsthand impact of this exception. In 2023, we saw a 25% increase in hospital response for sexual assault by a spouse, the most we've seen in our agency's history. Due to the increase in need in our rural service area, we have had to expand from 1 staff member to 5 staff members in rural programming. Sexual violence is about power and control and is used more frequently than we will ever know. When we safety plan with survivors, we utilize every tool and resource available. I have sat with survivors who went to report their assault and due to the spousal exception, they are denied the ability to seek justice and are not provided a protection order. Two fundamental pieces of safety planning are lost, and the survivor is still asked to believe that there is help for them.

Intimate Partner Violence is increasing everywhere, and sexual violence is a high lethality indicator for any survivor. I am asking this committee to support House Bill 161 and to eliminate the Spousal Rape Exception from the Ohio Revised Code. Survivors deserve to have their voices heard and their experiences acknowledged. Their relationship with a perpetrator should not remove the ability to use their voice and seek protection.

As an advocacy agency, WHW is charged to ensure that when those needs aren't being met, we bring it to the people who can make change. I respectfully encourage the Senate Judiciary Committee to support the passage of House Bill 161. Thank you for your time and the opportunity to testify in support of this legislation. I am happy to answer questions currently or via email at dcooper@womenhelpingwomen.org.