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Before the Senate Judiciary Committee

Senator Nathan Manning Chair

S.B. 223 Proponent Testimony of Steven N. Berk, MPH
Manager, Government Affairs
Giant Eagle, Inc.

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Chairman Manning, Vice Chair Reynolds, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, my name is Steven Berk, Manager, Government Affairs for Giant Eagle Incorporated. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 223, the FORCE Act.

Giant Eagle operates over 100 grocery and convenience stores in the state and employs 17,000 Ohioans. We are one of the state's largest employers. As such, we are uniquely positioned to comment on how organized retail crime negatively impacts our ability to deliver food, fuel, and pharmacy to consumers.

Organized retail crime is not a passive crime of opportunity or necessity. In reality, dangerous and diversified criminal enterprises are engaged in elaborate schemes; deftly operating within the current legal gaps that Senate Bill 223 seeks to address. These criminal rings maneuver around communities and businesses fully aware of the legal limits that hinder prosecution and prevent elevating misdemeanors to felonies.

Sophisticated criminal organizations routinely steal non-perishable items in quantities far exceeding reasonable personal consumption. The items targeted by criminals can easily be fenced either online or at flea and open-air markets. Within our business these products include laundry detergent, batteries, cosmetics, alcohol, and over-the-counter medications.

Organized retail crime is an epidemic that stagnates retail growth and hurts our ability to invest back into our communities to fight hunger. We are strongly committed to eliminating food waste and increasing food access to underserved neighborhoods. In Ohio alone we partner with six food banks, several food rescue organizations, and last year raised enough funds to provide 16.3 million meals for our neighbors in need.

Lastly, the greatest motivation for supporting Senate Bill 223 is the safety of our team members, our most valuable asset. Organized retail crime is committed by professional criminals that all too often resort to violence if they encounter store personnel or authorities. Just as we have seen an increase in theft in our stores, we have unfortunately also experienced an increase in violent encounters including the use of weapons.

Senate Bill 223 will be a substantial step forward in safeguarding Ohio's workforce and business community. Additionally, it will ensure that law enforcement has the resources they need to pursue and prosecute retail crime thefts. Thank you Chairman Manning and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee for allowing me to voice our support for Senate Bill 223. We encourage its favorable passage out of this committee. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Respectfully Submitted,

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