

Chairman Manning, Vice Chair Reynolds, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to come before you to provide proponent testimony on Senate Bill 223, which seeks fight organized retail crime in Ohio by creating a statewide task force and updating the Revised Code.

My name is Bryan Lindsay and I am a Major Crimes Investigations Manager for Walgreens. I have worked Organized Retail Crime cases for over 15 years as a detective in law enforcement and as an investigator with Walgreens. My current responsibilities include the development of our nationwide strategy to combat organized retail crime and the investigation of major crimes committed against the business.

Walgreens has been in business since 1901 and in Ohio since the early 1960s. We operate over 250 locations in the state including a Distribution Center, Micro Fulfillment Central Pharmacy and Specialty Pharmacies. Walgreens employs over 6,200 team members in the state.

I have seen first-hand how Organized Retail Theft groups operate, travel and cause large-scale losses across multiple victim retailers and states. Organized Retail Theft groups are made up of professional shoplifters known as boosters. These types of individuals are not taking advantage of opportunistic shoplifting for personal use, but rather stealing large quantities of the same type of merchandise for resale. It is essentially their job and source of income. Many professional shoplifters cause losses in the thousands of dollars in the matter of minutes. They travel from store to store, day after day, repeating this pattern. Walgreens has experienced a significant increase in product loss in Ohio and across the country over the last several years.

Boosters then sell the stolen merchandise to fences who pay a fraction of the retail price, clean off branding labels and resell the product to higher levels fences, online or at flea markets. These fences are what drives the continued demand for stolen merchandise and allow the cycle to continue.

While some groups operate locally, others travel across multiple cities and states. The various interstates running through Ohio connecting major cities across the country are leveraged by ORC groups. Often, they are already in another jurisdiction before a theft is identified making localized solutions to identify and prosecute difficult.

Organized Retail Crime not only results in substantial financial losses for businesses, but also jeopardizes the safety of employees and customers. Unfortunately, there has been an increase of retail theft incidents with violence.

The most common items stolen from Walgreens in these events are OTC medications and cosmetic products. These all pose a risk to consumer safety when stolen and resold as they are products that are ingested into the body or absorbed through the skin. Storage requirements and expiration dates matter with these items; these items are often transported and stored by these crime rings with no regard for safety measures.

These large scale thefts also create inconveniences for customers as they visit retail establishments to purchase items that are not available because they were stolen. Retailers are often forced to take preventive measures such as locking merchandise, which creates another inconvenience for customers and negatively impacts sales.

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Successfully combatting ORC requires a collective and collaborative partnership between retailers, law enforcement and prosecutors. When these groups are educated, aligned and equipped with the proper resources and tools, we can make an impact. Many other states throughout the country have enacted similar legislation and we have experienced first-hand the positive benefits of those actions. Senate Bill 223 provides the tools and resources to make this same impact in Ohio.

Retail crime continues to be one of the top challenges facing our industry today. At Walgreens, we are focused on the safety of our patients, customers and team members, and have programs in place to reduce organized retail theft in our stores. We also continue to partner with others across the retail industry, as well as law enforcement, elected officials and community leaders to improve shrink trends. I am excited about the work taking place in Ohio to combat Organized Retail Crime.