

WAYNE BRADY AND KARL WILLIS

TOLEDO, OH

Good morning, Chairman Manning, Vice Chair Reynolds, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide written proponent testimony on Sub. House Bill 234.

Alford pleas may be rare, but both of us are very familiar with them. We are now free men because we entered an *Alford* plea in 2023 in the Lucas County Common Pleas Court.

More than two decades ago, we were wrongfully convicted for the aggravated murder of a 13-year-old child, Maurice Purifie, in Toledo. No physical evidence linked us to the crime, and the witness who implicated us in the murder recanted her testimony. Meanwhile, the person who admitted being involved in the murder was given a plea deal to resolve the charges related to the murder of Maurice and an unrelated charge of rape and testified against us. After nearly 30 hours of deliberation, the jury returned guilty verdicts against us. We were sentenced to life imprisonment with the possibility of parole after 20 years. At the time we were sentenced, we were 19 and 21 years old.

We spent the next 23 years of our lives in prison for crimes we did not commit. We always maintained our innocence for that murder, which was a tragedy for Maurice's family and for our community in Toledo. But as innocent men, we fought for our freedom every day after our sentence.

As numerous appeals and motions for new trials failed, family members and loved ones died and we were unable to spend time with our children, who grew into adults. But with the help of the Ohio Innocence Project and the grace of God, our attorneys negotiated a plea deal with the Lucas County Prosecuting Attorney's Office. The plea deal was offered by the prosecutor "in the interests of justice."

It was a difficult decision for us to enter the *Alford* plea. After prayer and introspection, we accepted the offer so that we could return to our loved ones and community. We did so recognizing that although we are innocent, we might not ever gain our freedom.

We have great sympathy for Maurice and his family and recognize that his life was destroyed through a horrific crime. But as innocent men, we cannot accept responsibility for that tragedy because we played no role in it, and we did not do so when our *Alford* plea was accepted by the Lucas County Common Pleas Court. The judge in our case recognized the position we were in as we stood before him. He imposed a 26-year-sentence, acknowledged the 23 years that we had already served, and granted us judicial release with community control.

In our freedom, we have struggled to find employment and work through the trauma caused by our wrongful conviction. We hope that our innocence will be established in full and fight every day to be productive members of our community.

Although *Alford* pleas are rare, they are important to those of us who are wrongfully convicted. We want every innocent person in Ohio who has been convicted to have the freedom to maintain their innocence while accepting pleas that allow them to return home to their loved ones and communities. We urge you to vote in favor of Substitute House Bill 234 and appreciate your thoughtful consideration of this important bill.