

Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections Committee Testimony
March 5, 2025 9:30 am

Chair Abrams, Vice Chair Miller, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections Committee, thank you for allowing me to testify in favor of the Governor's Budget Proposal on Reentry Programs and Services.

My name is Michael Sutton, and I am here to share my lived experience and advocate for stronger reentry support in Ohio.

In 2006, at the age of 17, I was wrongfully convicted and sentenced to 46 and a half years in prison for a crime I did not commit. I was charged with a 21-count indictment, including attempted murder and felonious assault. After spending over 15 years behind bars, I was finally exonerated and released on May 3, 2021. While my freedom was restored, the challenges of reentry were just beginning.

One of the biggest struggles I faced upon release was securing stable housing. Unlike individuals who are released through traditional parole processes, I did not receive structured reentry support. The system failed me in so many ways, and I had to navigate these obstacles on my own. I know firsthand how critical housing and support services are for individuals returning home, whether wrongfully convicted or formerly incarcerated. Without these basic necessities, successful reintegration becomes nearly impossible.

Since my release, I have dedicated my life to reentry work. I am the co-founder of Voices of Injustice, an organization created by myself and five other wrongfully convicted individuals. Together, we provide resources and support for people reentering society. We go into prisons to share our stories, connect individuals with services, and help those returning home find stability. In Cleveland, we organize homeless outreach initiatives, clothing drives for halfway houses, and other essential community support efforts.

I see that there is a proposed budget of \$77,412,288 for reentry housing and support services. I urge this committee to ensure that a portion of these funds is allocated to Cleveland, where organizations like Project LIFT Services and Voices of Injustice are doing critical work to support returning citizens. There are so many people who come home with nothing—no housing, no clothing, no resources. This funding can help bridge the gap and provide a real chance at successful reintegration.

Reentry is not just about getting out of prison; it's about staying out and rebuilding lives. I believe in reentry, and I believe in the power of these programs to make a difference. I appreciate your time and consideration and welcome any questions.