



**Interested Party Testimony- House Development Committee
HB 96 — FY26-27 State Operating Budget
February 26, 2025**

Chairman Hoops, Vice Chair Lorenz, Ranking Member Abdullahi and members of the committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 96 in support of Freedom a la Cart's funding request **to deepen impact of and expand our workforce initiatives programs and model which provide human trafficking survivors the support, skills, and resources they need to be productive and successful members of Ohio's workforce.**

My name is Mickey Miller, and I am the Resource Manager for Freedom a la Cart.

I grew up in a small suburb in Cleveland, called Beachwood. I grew up very privileged with everything I wanted or needed. My parents adopted me all the way from Russia. I had a wonderful relationship with my mom, but my dad and I had a rocky relationship. He put a lot of pressure on me to be "perfect" — to get straight A's, to take advanced classes, and to go to college and get a degree. He was very hard on me when I fell short of his expectations and would try to shame me into being better. This began a long journey of basing my self worth in what a man thinks of me.

Two significant traumas happened to me in my teenage years that lead me down a dark and dangerous path. When I was 13, my best friend Nick committed suicide as a result of bullying. The school blamed me for his death because I knew he had suicidal ideations and did not tell anyone. I walked around feeling like I had killed my best friend for the next decade of my life. I was not given the tools and resources to cope with this trauma. Instead, I was just given medication to take when I felt panic attacks come on. This led to repressing my feelings and using drugs to escape the pain I felt. My parents had no idea how to help me.

The second trauma occurred three years later at 16 when I was raped by two of my guy friends. We were all under the influence of drugs and they told me afterward that I had wanted it, even though there was no way I could have consented because I was blacked out from substances. This experience taught me that I was only a body. That I wasn't a human being with a soul. That if men were always going to objectify me anyway, I may as well objectify myself and have the upper hand.

I started to become physically addicted to drugs and was a full-blown heroin addict by the time I was 18. I objectified myself as a pole dancer which is where I met the person who would eventually become my pimp. She was my friend, and I had trusted her. (Yes, my first trafficker was a woman!) She groomed me for months and months. Because a trusting relationship had been developed between us, I wasn't even able to recognize the coercion and manipulation that was happening to me. After that, I was trafficked by multiple people in my lifetime. I won't get into all the details, but I will get into how I escaped that lifestyle.

On my last day in active addiction, I was homeless, in active sex work for my trafficker, had multiple felony warrants between Cuyahoga and Lake Counties, and I was pregnant. I was living in an abandoned house, and these raccoons were trying to break into the home that I had created. This was the moment of clarity for me. I believe God spoke to me through the raccoons. They were looking at me and judging me, saying “You have a life inside you; it’s about you.” The next day I started calling treatment centers. Because I was addicted to several substances and carrying a child, nowhere in Cleveland would take me. I was told that to detox me off those substances while pregnant was a “liability.” I called place after place, until finally I found somewhere here in Columbus. I went to residential treatment, a partial hospitalization program, and then did sober living for a year. At an NA meeting, I saw someone wearing a shirt that says “As strong as the women around me,” I asked her where she got her shirt, and she told me Freedom a la Cart. I went home that night to my sober house and googled the organization. I immediately felt connected to the mission of helping women like me.

It took a couple months, but I got into the workforce development program at Freedom. In the workforce development program, I learned job skills, got connected with other women who understood my trauma, and I was able to get professional counseling while I was on the clock (yes paid!) When I started the job in the workforce development program, I very openly told everyone that I still had felony warrants in Cleveland; and the team at Freedom helped me create a plan to take care of those warrants. At this point in time, I was in recovery for a couple years, my baby that was a product of trafficking was almost 2 years old. I was also pregnant with my second child, with a wonderful man that loved my first child as his own. Because I was taught how to have healthy relationships.

In the first year I was in the workforce development program, I created a budget and learned how to save money. I got my own place and was mentally and financially preparing to turn myself into jail for those outstanding warrants. There was no way around it. Freedom supported me through all of it! I hired and paid for an attorney, set a date to turn myself in, took the time off work and was able to use the PTO I had accumulated. I also had a decent amount of money saved up so that I could pay my bills if I had to go to prison. I went into jail with a sense of undisturbed inner peace because I knew I was doing the right thing and that I had a tribe of so many people supporting me. I went before the judge with documentation of years of clean drug tests, and multiple letters from Freedom a la Cart – from Paula (the CEO), Vanessa (the Director of Programs) and Lindsey (The Workforce Development Specialist). Freedom was even prepared to Zoom into court and advocate for me. I did eight days total between Lake County and Parma. Everything was counted as time served and all the judges let me go. The Parma judge had me tell my story in the courtroom and she even waived all my fines. I came home to a job still waiting for me at Freedom — with everyone loving me, affirming me and supporting me.

Fast forward to today, and I’ve successfully completed the workforce development program and am now the Resource Manager at Freedom a la Cart for other survivors like me. I have turned my trauma into something beautiful to help other women. I had worked hard on getting my CDCA, and I am currently in school studying psychology. I love this job so much. And I am darn good at it! Working with the women on our staff and with our participants every day doesn’t even feel like work because I love what I do. **Freedom believed in me when I couldn’t even believe in myself.** They taught me how to be a leader, a woman, how to use my experiences to help others, how to be a mother, and

how to be a responsible member of society. And most importantly, they loved me until I learned how to love myself.

I kindly ask that you support our funding request so Freedom a la Cart can support more survivors.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I will now answer any questions you may have.

Mickey Miller
Resource Manager
Freedom a la Cart