



Melissa A. Knopp, Esq., Director
House Judiciary Committee Testimony
Ohio Criminal Sentencing Commission
February 26, 2025

Chairman Thomas, Vice Chair Mathews, Ranking Member Isaacsohn, and members of the House Judiciary Committee, my name is Melissa Knopp, and since October 2023 I have served as the Director for the Ohio Criminal Sentencing Commission. Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee today.

The Ohio Criminal Sentencing Commission is statutorily created within the Supreme Court of Ohio and is chaired, *Ex Officio*, by Chief Justice Sharon L. Kennedy. The thirty-one statutorily prescribed commission members are multi-disciplinary subject matter experts and represent all three branches of government.

I. Commission Overview

The Ohio Criminal Sentencing Commission was established by the 118th General Assembly with the enactment of Senate Bill 258 in 1990.

Under R.C. §181.23 through R.C. §181.26 the commission is charged with recommending and assisting the general assembly with developing, evaluating, implementing, and reviewing existing sentencing and juvenile disposition guidelines, processes, and procedures to create a sentencing structure and policy for Ohio that is designed to achieve fairness in sentencing and to enhance public safety by attaining certainty in sentencing, deterrence, and a reasonable use of correctional facilities, programs, and services.

In 2023 the commission voted to update its Operating Guidelines and reorganize its committee structure by eliminating irrelevant committees and creating new ones. The new committees have been tasked with making recommendations on issues within their subject-matter areas of expertise to be presented to the full commission for a vote at its scheduled public meetings. The current active committees of the commission are the Adult Criminal Justice Committee, Juvenile Justice Committee, Data Committee, and Personnel Committee.

The commission has seven full-time staff positions: myself, a program coordinator, three criminal justice policy counsels, and two research specialists.

II. Reporting Requirements

R.C. §181.25 and §181.27 require the commission to submit two separate reports on a biennial bases to the general assembly, the Monitoring Report and the HB1 Report, respectively. The Monitoring Report required under R.C. §181.25(A)(2) is due January 1st in odd numbered years



and analyzes the impact of the sentencing structure on political subdivisions and other relevant aspects of state and local governments including such information as the number and types of individuals being imprisoned or punished under a community control sanction; the fiscal impact of the laws on state and local criminal justice entities; and the impact of the sentencing structure on the appellate process. The 2023 Monitoring Report, published in June 2024, was the first Monitoring Report published by the commission since 2011. The 2023 Monitoring Report was also the first to fully address all provisions of the commission's R.C. 181.25(A)(2) responsibilities and set a framework for future reports. At its November 2024 meeting, the commission voted to approve the 2025 Monitoring Report for publication and also requested that commission staff draft a supplemental to the report analyzing specialized dockets and the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction's Targeted Community Alternatives to Prison (TCAP) program. The 2025 Monitoring Report Supplemental will be reviewed and voted upon for approval and publication by the commission at its March 6th meeting.

The HB1 Biennial Impact Study required under R.C. §181.27(B)(2) is due to the general assembly and the governor no later than December 31st of odd numbered years and instructs the commission to study the impact of specifically delineated statutes that address the attorney general reimbursement fund, community control sanctions, intervention in lieu of conviction, sealing and expungement of convictions or bail forfeitures, and the civil process for proceedings for treatment of an individual experiencing alcohol and other drug abuse. Under my tenure as Director, the commission reviewed and approved this report for publication in November 2023. Commission staff is currently researching, analyzing, and drafting the 2025 HB1 Biennial Impact Study due in December of 2025.

House Bill 301 of the 135th General Assembly statutorily reestablished the commission's juvenile committee to serve as a resource and assist in creating and modifying Ohio's juvenile justice policies and statutes. In response to this statutory change, the commission's 2025 Monitoring Report for the first time included analysis of juvenile justice data.

III. Legislative Resource

R.C. §181.25(A) further charges the commission to review all bills that are introduced in the general assembly that provide for new criminal offenses or changes the penalty for any criminal offense to determine if those bills are consistent with the state sentencing policy and the impact upon correctional resources. Based on its analysis, the commission is further authorized to recommend any necessary amendments to those pieces of legislation. Additionally, R.C. §181.25(A) charges the commission with studying criminal sentencing structures in Ohio, other states, and the federal government and to recommend necessary changes to the sentencing structure of the state and determine the costs and effects of any proposed changes.



IV. Budget

In October of 2023, I was hired as the new Director of the commission. As Director, I have worked diligently to refocus the commission's work back to its statutory mandates to serve as a resource to all three branches of government in regard to sentencing legislation, analysis, implementation and resources. These ongoing refocusing efforts have subsequently resulted in a 39.3% decrease in the commission's biennial budget request for Fiscal Year (FY) 2026 compared to the FY 2025 budget that was approved by the 135th General Assembly.

In the FY 2026/2027 biennium budget, the commission, in addition to meeting its statutory obligations, will strive to provide more sentencing focused resources to criminal justice constituencies at a cost savings to Ohio taxpayers. The commission is requesting almost \$1 million dollars (\$986,927) a year less as a result of its vote to move the sentencing entry form in-house instead of contracting with an outside entity to maintain it. Another result of this vote is that the commission only added one of the six additional new staff identified by the previously director to maintain the sentencing form and approved in the FY 2024/2025 budget.

While the budget request before you will result in nearly a \$1 million annual savings to Ohio taxpayers, the tangible benefits that the Ohio Criminal Sentencing Commission is providing, and will continue to provide, are increasing.

Under my tenure as Director, the commission has published three of its statutorily mandated reports, held over 30 committee meetings, produced five comprehensive sentencing resource guides, maintained the standard sentencing entry form and expanded access to it, convened in partnership with the Ohio Office of Criminal Justice Services a statewide criminal justice research collaborative, produced two criminal justice data maps, reengaged with members of the general assembly as a policy resource on criminal justice issues, reviewed over 40 introduced bills, and, at the direction of the legislature, has reestablished a standing statutory juvenile justice committee. These are merely a few of the many accomplishments that we will continue to build on in Fiscal Years 2026 and 2027.

V. Conclusion

The commission, its committees, and its staff are dedicated to continuing to fulfill the statutory requirements that this body has entrusted to their care. Fiscal responsibility in those efforts is of the utmost importance, and I am confident that this biennial budget request will effectively and efficiently provide the commission with the resources it needs to meet its statutory obligations.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a more comprehensive outline for the Ohio Criminal Sentencing Commission's biennial budget request and mission. Your consideration is greatly appreciated. I am happy to take any questions that you may have.