Ohio Statehouse
1 Capitol Square
Columbus, OH 43215

September 19, 2025

HB 296 Proponent Testimony – House Judiciary Committee

Chair Thomas, Vice Chair Swearingen, and Ranking Member Synenburg, and members of the committee: thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 296.

My name is Emily Vollmer. I am a Christian, who was incarcerated for 18 months between jail and prison here in Ohio. I am a Justice Ambassador advocate with Prison Fellowship. Unfortunately, I was in an abusive relationship that led to my incarceration. Prior to jail and prison, I knew of God but did not have a relationship with Him. While awaiting my sentence, I was baptized and encountered Jesus like never before. After incarceration, I walked out of prison grounded in Christ but was also faced with $10,000 in court fines and fees.

When I was released, my entire world was flipped upside down. I lost my home, my children, my employment, and more importantly my sense of purpose. I left the Ohio Reformatory for Women (ORW) and was on Post Release Control (PRC), feeling absolutely lost. If it had not been for one friend, who took me in during my most vulnerable time, I do not know if I would be standing before you today. But God knew exactly what He was doing. That friend is now my husband, whom I am extremely blessed to be with.

During the reentry process, I was very diligent about meeting with my parole officer. I worked hard to meet all of the conditions of my release, including mental health care, child support, and a monthly parole fee. On top of that, being faced with over $10,000 worth of court fines and fees during one of the most difficult times of my life caused me to feel like going to prison all over again.

Even though I was discouraged by this overwhelming debt, I did not lose hope that I could follow the new path God has me on. I was able to secure a job as a general manager at a local establishment, despite my criminal record. I worked 60+ hours a week, but even with that, I could barely pay child support, health insurance for my kids, parole fees, and meet my basic living expenses. At this point in my reentry journey, I had nothing left to pay toward my fines and fees. I was not given any time to get back on my feet before starting payments.

After roughly six months, I received a summons from my sentencing judge over the unpaid court debt. The judge made it clear that if I did not start paying the court fines and fees immediately, I could be sent back to prison. I was told I could apply my monthly parole fee toward those costs, an option I hadn't even known existed. Just as I was beginning to feel stable, I suddenly faced the possibility of more time behind bars. It was terrifying. All I could do was pray and do my best to figure out a way forward.

After six months on PRC, I completed all of the responsibilities outside of repaying my court debt. Because of those fines and fees, I remained under PRC supervision for a total of three years. When my PRC finally ended, it was marked "unsuccessful" simply because I am still making payments. I am still learning about the implications this label has for my future. In fact, it is one of the reasons I have not applied for a Certificate of Qualified Employment. Additionally, I am studying to be a social worker, and I may not be eligible to apply for the license or sit for the exam due to this label from the fines and fees.

I hope and pray that others do not have to go through what I have been through. I stand before you to share how helpful HB 296 would have been for me and the possible impact for Ohioans returning home from prison. If we can give six months of grace to those trying to positively rebuild their lives, it will give them time to get on their feet and be better positioned to successfully make their payments, preventing non-payment from snowballing into other consequences.

Thank you all for your time and attention, I hope that you all will support HB 296. I am happy to answer any questions.