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To: **House Judiciary Committee**
Fr: **Michaela Burriss, Policy Director**
Re: **House Bill 296 Proponent Testimony**
Date: **Wednesday, September 24, 2025**

Good morning, Chair Thomas, Vice Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Synenberg, and members of the Judiciary Committee. Thank you for allowing me to testify on behalf of the Ohio Justice & Policy Center in support of House Bill (HB) 296, legislation concerning financial sanctions following release from either prison or transitional control.

At the Ohio Justice & Policy Center, we don't write people off. OJPC is a nonprofit law firm with offices in Cincinnati, Columbus, and Cleveland. Our mission is to promote fair, intelligent, and redemptive criminal justice systems. We fight for equal, compassionate justice and fair treatment of those who are incarcerated in all stages of their incarceration, because every person deserves dignity after their conviction and freedom after their sentence.

OJPC's policy reform agenda is transformative and rooted in our client-centered approach, including our flagship projects: **Beyond Guilt**, **Second Chance**, and **Human Rights in Prison**. This guides our work in and with the Ohio legislature. We believe HB 296 can help give those with criminal records a needed **Second Chance**. By not requiring the payment of any outstanding court-assessed fines, fees, financial sanctions, or costs arising from a criminal proceeding within the first 180 days following release from either prison, if the sentence is one year or more, or completion of a transitional control period, Ohio can further expand the freedom of people with criminal records and empower them to positively participate in their communities to break generational cycles of poverty.

Ohio has a very high incarceration rate and one in every three Ohio adults have a criminal record of some kind. Incarceration in Ohio is costly at over $44,000 a year per person and our prisons are overcrowded, sometimes exceeding 130% capacity. The average prison stay is 2.73 years and 95% of state prisoners are released eventually, nearly 80% into parole supervision. The impact of the state's penal system is much closer to us than many realize.

Upon re-entry with a criminal record, one will encounter collateral sanctions: 2,679 legal penalties and restrictions at the state and federal level. People with criminal records face unprecedented, lifelong barriers to:

- Obtaining and retaining employment;
- Finding safe, stable housing;
- Pursuing an education;
- Acquiring professional licensing; and
- Volunteering at schools or charities.

This is compounding when considering that the root causes of crime are poverty, lack of education, and untreated mental health and addiction. Collateral sanctions account for billions of dollars in lost wages, wages that generate wealth for households and taxable income for governments. 50 percent of people with court-related financial obligations have experienced homelessness at some point in their lives. Communities and families, not just individuals, bear the cost when someone with a criminal record can't obtain stability.

By delaying court fine and fee payments for the first six months after reentry, HB 296 allows individuals to stabilize their finances, secure essential needs like housing and employment, and focus on rebuilding their lives without the immediate pressure of debt collectors and the risk of negative consequences. This period is crucial for establishing a foundation for long-term financial health, as immediate payment obligations can lead to lower credit scores, difficulties in obtaining loans, and potential re-incarceration for unpaid debt (Ohio's Debtors' Prisons).

Historically, Ohio has justified court fines and fees to further punish and fund the justice system, the idea being that the cost of the legal process is the responsibility of the person who created the need for that expenditure and to deter future misconduct. However, this and other very recent General Assemblies have noted the unintended impact of justice-related payments and debt on that very misconduct and are championing bipartisan reforms. These have included, but are not limited to, prohibitions on arrest or citation quotas as well as ending, and automatically removing, existing driver's license suspensions for unpaid court fines and fees related to minor traffic offenses and some drug violations. HB 296 is very aligned with your progress toward smarter and more redemptive criminal justice systems as well as safer and thriving communities.

Chair Thomas, Vice Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Synenberg, and members of the Judiciary Committee, thank you again for allowing me to present the Ohio Justice & Policy Center's strong support for HB 296. I would be glad to answer any questions.