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**House Public Safety Committee  
Proponent Testimony for H.B. 217  
June 17, 2025**

Maria York, Policy Director  
Ohio Domestic Violence Network

Chair Abrams, Vice Chair Miller, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the House Public Safety Committee:

My name is Maria York, and I am the Policy Director for the Ohio Domestic Violence Network. Thank you for the opportunity to provide support for H.B. 217, legislation that would require missing persons cases to be entered into the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) within a specified timeframe.

The Ohio Domestic Violence Network (ODVN) is Ohio's federally designated domestic violence coalition, representing 76 local domestic violence organizations throughout the state. We believe this bill will create a critical safety net for victims of domestic violence and other vulnerable populations, ensuring they are not lost in inconsistent local systems.

Survivors of domestic violence are among those most vulnerable to go missing. Some disappear while fleeing abuse. Others are isolated or forcibly taken by an abuser. And in the most tragic cases, they are murdered and not immediately identified. In ODVN's most recent annual fatality report, we documented 114 deaths in 85 domestic violence cases. In 72% of these cases, the individuals involved had prior contact with the criminal and/or civil justice systems.<sup>1</sup> As systems workers, we recognize there are missed opportunities for intervention and understand the need for coordinated, trauma-informed responses.

NamUs offers another method of coordination. It provides a centralized, trauma-informed platform that helps identify and support missing persons more effectively than traditional systems, which often don't capture the complexities of domestic violence. Survivors may avoid law enforcement for safety reasons, meaning their disappearance might not be immediately recognized or fully investigated. A comprehensive study analyzing over 34,000 missing person cases within the NamUs database revealed that approximately 12.7% of active cases indicated that foul play may have been a factor in the person's disappearance. Violence was more prevalent in cases involving females, with physical violence as the most common form.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ohio Domestic Violence Fatalities. 2024. <https://www.odvn.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Fatality-Infographic-2024.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Hafner, S. P., Spamer, B. J., & Budowle, B. (2020). *Cases Associated with Violence in the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs): The Examination of Circumstances & Characteristics Project*. U.S. Department of Justice. <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/301932.pdf>



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NamUs also empowers families and loved ones, not just police, to report missing persons. This is critical in domestic violence cases, where survivors may be cut off from communication or have gone without contact to stay safe. Families are sometimes left in the painful position of not knowing whether silence means safety or danger. NamUs gives them a trauma-informed, non-punitive way to raise concerns, particularly useful when violence is suspected or when abusers have moved survivors across jurisdictions. Finally, the data collected through NamUs can help identify trends, such as clusters of missing women connected to intimate partner violence, which then can guide prevention efforts and resource allocation.

We also want to provide clarification around federal confidentiality laws under the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA). These laws strictly prohibit the disclosure of personally identifying information about survivors without their informed, written, time-limited consent or a valid court order.<sup>3</sup> This includes confirming whether someone is receiving services at a domestic violence shelter.

In practice, abusers sometimes file missing person reports not out of concern, but as a tactic to locate or regain control over a survivor. When law enforcement arrives in response to such reports, our shelters follow a structured process that prioritizes both survivor safety and legal compliance. If the survivor is staying at the shelter, they are informed of the request and may respond within 24 hours, either in person or through their attorney. The inquiring law enforcement agency is also informed that if they do not hear anything from the shelter or resident within that time period, then that person is not in shelter. This protocol is outlined in ODVN's *Promising Practices Manual*, which describes best practices for handling welfare checks and missing person inquiries in a way upholds survivor confidentiality and federal law.<sup>4</sup>

On behalf of the Ohio Domestic Violence Network and our 76 member programs, I would like to thank Representatives Cockley and Ritter for championing this legislation. H.B. 217 is a meaningful step toward creating a more coordinated, just, and compassionate response to missing persons in Ohio: one that reflects the needs of domestic violence survivors and honors those we have lost.

Thank you for your time. I am happy to answer any questions.

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<sup>3</sup> Violence Against Women Act: 34 U.S.C. § 12291(b)(2); Victims of Crime Act regulations: 28 C.F.R. § 94.115.

<sup>4</sup> Ohio Domestic Violence Network. *Promising Practices Manual: Guidelines for Domestic Violence Programs Serving Ohio's Communities*, 2022. [https://www.odvn.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/PromisingPracticesManual2022\\_web.pdf](https://www.odvn.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/PromisingPracticesManual2022_web.pdf)