

44th House District

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State Representative Joshua E. Williams
Ohio House of Representatives

Good afternoon, Chairman Ghanbari, Vice Chair Dean, Ranking Member Upchurch, fellow members of the Ohio House Small Business Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on H.B. 615 today.

Retailers across our state are under siege by organized theft rings that no longer resemble petty shoplifting incidents. Instead, they resemble coordinated, rapid-strike criminal operations, with multiple individuals entering a store together, overwhelming staff, and making off with large amounts of merchandise in a matter of moments. The Ohio Council of Retail merchants estimates that organized retail theft costs Ohio businesses \$2 billion to \$3 billion annually.¹ We need to ensure that Ohio responds to this escalating threat with the seriousness it demands, in order to protect our businesses, our workers, and our communities from coordinated criminal activity.

H.B. 615 closes a dangerous gap in current law by prohibiting any person from knowingly joining with one or more others to commit a retail-theft crime when the stolen property from one or more establishments is worth \$1,000 or more. Under this legislation, such coordinated criminal activity is no longer treated as mere shoplifting, it becomes a serious offense worthy of felony treatment.

¹ <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.ohiochamber.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/FOR-IMMEDIATE-RELEASE.pdf>

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Second, H.B. 615 introduces a tiered penalty structure to reflect the scale and severity of the crime. First, a coordinated theft with a small group of one to three people becomes a 5th-degree felony; second, a coordinated theft with four or more participants becomes a 3rd-degree felony, carrying a presumption of prison time; and finally, in the case of a theft by ten or more people, involving \$5,000 or more in stolen goods, the offense escalates to a 2nd-degree felony. This structure sends a clear message to would-be criminal rings; Ohio will not tolerate organized retail crime.

These enhanced penalties are not just about punishment; they are about prevention. Organized theft rings saddle businesses with enormous losses, endangering staff and customers, and drive-up prices across the board. By targeting the criminal networks orchestrating these thefts, we can better protect workers, safeguard our local businesses, and preserve the affordability of goods for Ohio families.

Thank you again Chairman Ghanbari, Vice Chair Dean, Ranking Member Upchurch, fellow members of the Ohio House Small Business Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today and I welcome any questions you may have.