

## **Testimony for Ohio State Financial Allocation Committee**

**Submitted by Maria Bonvechio**

**Date: May 22, 2025**

### **H.B. 96 Interested Party Testimony**

Good [morning/afternoon],

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Finance Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Maria Bonvechio. I am a survivor, a mother, and an advocate. And I am here on behalf of every victim who has been silenced by trauma, confusion, or the weight of navigating a system that was never built with their voice in mind.

When I speak about victims' rights, I do so from lived experience, not legal theory or secondhand accounts. I know what it feels like to be left behind by the very systems that claim to protect us. I know what it means to fight not only for justice but for basic recognition, safety, and dignity. And I know that trauma doesn't end with a court date—it lingers in bodies, in families, and across generations.

Nine years ago—on June 2nd, 2016—my 11-year-old son was brutally kidnapped, raped, and beaten nearly to death in a random act of violence. This random act of violence was committed by a homeless transient, a person with no connection to our family nor ties to our community. My son suffered a traumatic brain injury. He has a mesh implant holding his skull together, required over 700 stitches and staples to his face, and carries deep physical scars—daily silent reminders. The psychological scars run even deeper. My two young daughters, at the ages of five and seven years old at the time, were among those who found him. And not a day has passed since that we haven't felt the impact of that moment. It changed everything. It shows up in our daily routines, personality responses, and in unspoken ways we brace ourselves for the world. Many days, I still can't find the words that encapsulate what this feels like. Perhaps, I never will.

I'm here today to urge this committee to fully fund and expand support for victims' services in Ohio—specifically the Ohio Crime Victim Justice Center (OCVJC).

It took me eight painful months of navigating the court system alone before I found OCVJC. I had no idea that victims had constitutional rights. No idea how to assert them. And while prosecutors pursue criminal convictions, they are not tasked with protecting or prioritizing the individual rights and needs of victims. That's not a flaw in their commitment—it's a limitation of the system.

OCVJC filled that gap.

OCVJC changed the trajectory of our traumatization.

The moment they stepped in, everything changed. They gave structure to my chaos. They provided legal guidance, trauma-informed advocacy, and—most of all—presence. They didn't just help us navigate the legal process; they stood beside us as people.

In contrast, what we were handed in the hospital was a printed booklet from the Attorney General's office. This booklet did not come close to preparing us for what we were going to face, before, during, and after the trial. No one explained what would come next. No one warned us how isolating the court preparation and the courtroom could be. No one stood up when my son's rights were quietly pushed aside while decisions were made about my child's life.

OCVJC did.

They didn't just give me a lawyer—they gave me a voice.

That is why I stand before you today—not just for myself, but for the thousands of victims across Ohio still navigating this system alone, lost in the same confusion and silence that once consumed me. They deserve more than a process—they deserve the dignity of being seen, heard, and supported by professionals who treat them as human beings, not just another case file.

OCVJC provided my family with acts of kindness that are immeasurable to victims.

Every victim deserves what I received; someone fighting beside them.

Marsy's Law, passed by voters in 2017, guarantees that victims' rights are protected just as vigorously as those of the accused. But rights without access are just words. If we don't fund the mechanisms that enforce those rights, we fail every Ohioan who believed in that promise.

We fail my other two children, just 12 and 8 years old in 2017, who bravely walked signatures into the Ohio Statehouse to help make Marsy's Law a reality. They fought

for every victim to have rights that could never be ignored or erased. They are survivors, too—deeply impacted by the same brutal attack—and yet they rose with courage to demand justice for others. So, I ask you: What do I tell them now, when the very system they believed in is letting victims down again? When the funding they fought for is stripped away? If we don't uphold these rights, their courage—and the law itself—becomes nothing more than a broken promise. Another act of revictimization.

OCVJC is facing a crisis.

Founded 25 years ago, OCVJC has served nearly 11,000 crime victims across every county in Ohio. And now, due to devastating funding cuts, they face losing almost half their staff, which would mean turning away hundreds, possibly thousands, of victims each year.

Let me be clear: these are not theoretical consequences. These are children, families, and survivors whose cases will falter not for lack of evidence, but for lack of support and representation.

Meanwhile, the people who harmed them walk in with full legal defense.

OCVJC is requesting only 0.2% of the State Public Defender's budget. A fraction. A lifeline. A modest ask for such critical, life-altering services.

Because this isn't just about budgets. It's about basic human decency. It's about making sure no victim walks alone into a courtroom or a hospital. It's about providing real access to housing, therapy, transportation, legal protection, and most importantly, hope.

When we don't fund these services, we don't just leave victims behind—we erase them.

Without sustained funding, many of these resources disappear. And when they do, the message we send to victims is that their pain doesn't matter. They are on their own. And that cannot be the message Ohio sends.

I come from a rural county. But trauma doesn't care about geography, income, race, or age. Healing, however, does require access. And access requires investment.

I'm asking you, on behalf of every survivor still waiting for support, to fund the promise we made when Marsy's Law passed.

My story is just one of many. But by funding victims' rights—by funding OCVJC—you ensure that countless others have a fighting chance: to be seen, to be heard, and to rebuild.

Fund OCVJC.

Fund victims' rights.

Fund justice.

Thank you for your time—and for standing with us.