

Chair Manchester, Vice Chair Brenner, Ranking Member Weinstein, and members of the Ohio Senate Government Oversight and Reform Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Maxine Rojas-Bruno. I am a biotechnology student at the Delaware Area Career Center, and I am here in support of Senate Bill 111.

Henrietta Lacks was born in 1920 and lived up until 1951 after her battle with cervical cancer. She grew up in a time of prejudice and racism against African Americans, especially with the mistreatment of them within medicine. A prominent example is The Tuskegee Syphilis Study, which started in 1932, studied the progression of untreated syphilis in 600 Black men. The U.S. Public Health Service had told each man that they would receive free medical care, but they were left purposely untreated even when a cure for syphilis was released. With Lacks, there was still heavy segregation of buildings; the hospital she stayed at through her battle with cancer was no exception, placing her within the “colored” ward of Johns Hopkins Hospital. The sample of her cervical cancer cells that was taken, despite leading to significant medical advances, was still unjust because she was never informed of her sample being taken, nor given compensation.

This commonplace mistreatment led to decades worth of civil rights movements, through legal action and peaceful protests. Today, we see the continuation of their activism through the Black Lives Matter movement. While this social movement focuses on more police brutality, it still shows all of us that there is still underlying prejudice against Black people within our society. Growing up with discrimination about your race is challenging; it’s harmful to the youth who are accustomed to only being seen by the color of their skin instead of who they are as a person.

It has been a long time coming to make reforms to the systemic racism that is still so prevalent within society. Passing Senate Bill 111 to name Henrietta Lacks Day as an official state-recognized day will help everyone move forward to a more unified culture, as we honor Henrietta Lacks not just for her unfortunate death and what came from her immortalized cell line, but also to remember the discrimination that African Americans have faced for decades. By recognizing this day, we can keep pushing forward with social justice and reform to impact many generations to come, in hopes of lessening and inevitably removing the stigma against Black people. It is always important to remember our history, as it provides us with the opportunity to learn from it and move forward.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you all today. It has been an honor.