hope & healing
SURVIVOR RESOURCE CENTER

Serving Survivors Of
Domestic Violence
Sexual Violence
Human Trafficking

Formerly Known As
Battered Women's Shelter
& Rape Crisis Center

**Written Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 421**
Submitted to the Ohio Senate Judiciary Committee

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May 18, 2026

Chair, Vice Chair, Ranking Member, and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today in support of Senate Bill 421.

My name is Teresa Stafford-Wright. I am a Survivor-Leader and the Chief Executive Officer of the Hope & Healing Survivor Resource Center, serving Summit and Medina Counties. Throughout my career, I have had the honor of supporting thousands of survivors as they navigated the criminal justice system, both as an advocate at the Cleveland Rape Crisis Center and as the Witness Victim Coordinator at the Cuyahoga County Prosecutor's Office. I also speak today as a survivor. I understand both professionally and personally the long-lasting impact sexual violence has on every aspect of a person's life.

Survivors of sexual violence can pursue justice through both the criminal and civil court systems. However, far too often, survivors are forced into an impossible choice. Over the years, I have sat in many meetings where survivors were discouraged from filing civil action against the person who harmed them. Prosecutors would often tell survivors that pursuing a civil case could negatively impact the criminal case, interfere with trial strategy, or give the defense an advantage.

Imagine being a survivor who is already carrying fear, shame, trauma, and uncertainty, and then being told by a prosecutor, someone viewed as an authority figure, that seeking full justice may hurt your case. Almost every survivor chose not to pursue the civil case.

Throughout my career, I witnessed survivors lose access to civil remedies because they were encouraged to wait until the criminal process concluded before pursuing civil action. By the time the criminal case ended, the statute of limitations had expired. This was not an isolated incident. It was a repeated barrier survivors faced while trying to navigate a system that often forced them to choose one form of justice over another.

The survivor was then left carrying the financial and emotional burden alone. Sexual violence does not end after the assault. Survivors often experience significant financial hardship, including lost wages, inability to maintain employment, ongoing counseling costs, medical expenses, relocation expenses, and long-term impacts on their mental and physical health. A

forensic exam may be covered, but healing is not. Therapy is not. Time away from work is not. Rebuilding one's life is not.

Ohio's current law only gives many adult survivors one to two years to seek civil justice. The reality is that trauma does not operate on a legal timeline. Many survivors do not immediately disclose because they are trying to survive. Some fear retaliation. Some are navigating manipulation or coercion by the offender. Some are struggling with PTSD, depression, anxiety, or substance use connected to their victimization. Others simply are not emotionally safe enough to revisit the trauma in a courtroom setting within such a short timeframe.

We must also acknowledge that not every survivor chooses to engage with the criminal legal system. When accountability rates for sexual violence remain painfully low, many survivors seek other paths toward justice and healing. Civil remedies may be the only avenue that allows a survivor to regain some sense of control, accountability, and financial stability.

Senate Bill 421 is about creating fairness and access. Extending the civil statute of limitations to five years recognizes the realities of trauma and the barriers survivors face when seeking justice.

Passing SB 421 would allow survivors to pursue both criminal and civil accountability without fear that one process will jeopardize the other. It would also give survivors the time needed to make decisions when they are emotionally, mentally, and physically safe enough to do so.

At its core, this bill asks a simple question: should survivors lose access to justice because trauma delayed their ability to come forward or because they trusted the criminal justice process first? I believe the answer is no.

Survivors deserve time. Survivors deserve options. Survivors deserve access to justice.

I respectfully urge this committee to pass Senate Bill 421. Thank you for your time and consideration, and I am happy to answer any questions.

Respectfully,

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