

House Bill 135 Sponsor Testimony
Representative LaTourette

Chairman Derickson, Vice Chair Ginter, Ranking Member Howse and members of the Community and Family Advancement committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on HB 135. This Down syndrome non-discrimination act is priority legislation for Ohio Right to Life and aims to prohibit abortions from taking place on the basis of a Down syndrome diagnosis.

I'm well aware that this committee has previously listened to extensive emotional testimony about abortion, the rights of the unborn, and a woman's right to choose. I'm also aware that this is a topic none of us take lightly, and that all of us have our minds made up on. I'm not standing before you today to try to change your feelings on abortion, but instead to bring attention to what I believe to be one of the worst types of discrimination possible.

Upon receiving a potential diagnosis of Down syndrome for their unborn child, up to 90% of women choose abortion. Substitute House Bill 552 from last General Assembly sought to address this alarming disparity. The Down Syndrome Information Act requires medical professionals to distribute up-to-date, evidence-based information on Down syndrome to parents who receive the diagnosis, either prenatally or after birth. These are not the stories of rape and unplanned pregnancies often used to explain away the practice of killing our unborn, but instead are families intent on growing only to tragically choose otherwise when faced with a less than perfect outcome. I'm not here to judge these almost parents. I can only imagine how scary and overwhelming a diagnosis like Down syndrome would be. Not everyone is fit to parent a child with Down syndrome; I will be the first person to admit that. However, there are many options out there for parents that find themselves in this situation. Choosing to end a person's life simply because of this diagnosis is discrimination. Period.

Down syndrome is a genetic condition caused by the presence of all or a partial extra copy of chromosome 21. Common traits a person with Down syndrome exhibit include: low muscle tone, a small stature, an upward slant to their eyes, a single deep crease across the center of their palm and some degree of intellectual disability. A person with Down syndrome is at increased risk for several medical conditions including: congenital heart defects, respiratory, hearing and vision problems, thyroid conditions and gastrointestinal issues. **All of these conditions are treatable and/or manageable with modern healthcare and the majority of individuals with Down syndrome are now able to lead healthy, long lives.**

One in every 691 babies is diagnosed with Down syndrome making it the most common genetic condition. 400,000 Americans are currently living with Down syndrome and, on average, 6,000 babies with Down syndrome are born each year. The life expectancy of a person diagnosed with Down syndrome has increased

dramatically over the last several decades – from just 25 in 1983 to 60+ today. While all individuals diagnosed with Down syndrome will experience cognitive delays, these delays are more often than not only mild to moderate.

Over 2,000 parents and guardians of people with Down syndrome were surveyed – 79% reported that their outlook on life was more positive because of their child with Down syndrome. Among siblings (12 and older), 97% expressed feelings of pride about their sibling with Down syndrome and 88% thought they were better people because of their experience. Individuals with Down syndrome were also surveyed. 99% are happy with their lives. 97% like who they are and 96% like how they look.

Again, I'm aware that even with all health and educational advances surrounding Down syndrome, that not all individuals are equipped to parent a child with this diagnosis. But again, there are many organizations that exist – ranging from support to placement – that are able to help.

Regardless of which corner of the state you live, there is an organization dedicated to improving the lives of people with Down syndrome and their families. In Northeast Ohio, The Up Side of Downs provides support, education and advocacy. In Central Ohio, The Down Syndrome Association of Central Ohio serves 18 counties and promotes community involvement, and in Southwest Ohio the Downs Syndrome Association of Greater Cincinnati empowers individuals, educates families, enhances communities and celebrates the lives of people with Down syndrome.

The National Down Syndrome Adoption Network (NDSAN) – provides information to families who may be seeing alternatives to parenting. They have a registry of adoptive families across the United States looking to adopt children with Down syndrome. There are no fees. The organization also provides support to the adoptive families.

A diagnosis of Down syndrome for your unborn child is devastating and life changing. Not everyone is equipped to handle this lifelong commitment, but thankfully as you can see, there are now many options available to families. I believe that life begins at conception and that abortion is wrong. But regardless of if you agree with me or not, I hope that you can see that this isn't an issue about abortion – it's an issue of discrimination. Discriminating against a person, not allowing them their God given right to life, simply because they MIGHT have Down syndrome.

Chairman Derickson, Vice Chair Ginter, Ranking Member Howse and members of the Community and Family Advancement committee, thank you again for the opportunity to testify on HB 135.