

House Bill 139 – Public Testimony

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Chair Anielski, Vice Chair Hambley, thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify today in support of House Bill 139, opening certain closed records to the public after 100 years. I'm here to represent The Ohio County Archivists and Records Managers Association (CARMA), which was formed nearly 20 years ago as a vehicle for County government employees across the State to gather and share questions and ideas about records our agencies create and maintain. Among the discussions of retention, preservation, and how to keep up with changing technology, there was and continues to be questions regarding access to unquestionably historical records. Accessibility to certain local records depends on location, and in some cases can change when new public officials are elected. A legislative committee was formed and for the last several years the hard work of several individuals has resulted in the Bill we are discussing today.

I'd like to share an ongoing story where access to confidential records has had a positive impact on a community and offered the opportunity to reach out beyond one geographical space in Ohio.

Wood County is fortunate to be one of the last counties in Ohio to have a poor farm where nearly all of the original buildings remain in place. The County Infirmary ceased operation as a nursing home in 1971 and in 1975 opened as a local history museum. In the 2000's, thousands of people have toured the buildings and grounds. Included is a chance to view the Lunatic House, a two-story structure located next to the main building. Built in 1885 to house adult males with mental illness, the Lunatic House's first residents were eight men brought from

the Perrysburg Insane Farm in 1886. The building served its initial purpose for only a few years, as by 1900 legislation required people determined mentally ill to be housed in State hospitals.

In 2000, renovation of the Lunatic House begun, with it officially opening to the public in 2004. Thanks to the cooperation of the Wood County Probate Court Judge, the Historical Center and Museum staff were able to research the Court's Lunacy Record and, though with privacy restrictions, use information and images from the records to tell the story of mental health treatment in the 19th Century and the stigma attached to it. The exhibit, *Chasing the White Rabbit: An Historical Look at American Mental Illness*, received an achievement award from the Ohio Association of Historical Societies and Museums for its explanation of mental health care history.

In updating the exhibit for a tenth anniversary observance in 2014, Museum curator Holly Uppal noted that the records provided not only diagnosis of individuals, but illustrated trends in gender, age, and location that over time illustrated connections between other events and personal experiences impacting the society of the era.

The museum, local mental health agencies, and academics have continued to coordinate educational and outreach activities related to the exhibit in the years since its opening. The Wood County affiliate of the National Alliance on Mental Illness has co-hosted several lectures with the museum that have utilized information from the historical record.

Access to the records maintained by Probate Court has enriched the exhibit by bringing the history of mental health home to visitors. These local primary sources not only teach us about the challenges and struggle of the past, but can also reflect on current society norms and expectations. As we observe the centennial of the United States' entry into World War I, mental

health records related to soldiers who suffered “shell shock” can inform the current discussion of veterans struggling with PTSD today.

Unfortunately, there is great variance from County to County regarding whether such records should be made public for any reason. That the records are historical are not questioned, but whether or not that historical value should be made available is unclear to many. House Bill 139 would address this and provide the people of Ohio an opportunity to come to a greater understanding of the shared experiences of generations past and present.

Chair Anielski, Vice Chair Hambley, members of the House State and Local Government Committee, thank you for your time and the opportunity to speak to you today. I would be glad to take any questions you may have.