

WOMEN HELPING WOMEN

Serving ALL Survivors of Domestic
Violence, Sexual Assault, and Stalking

WHW prevents gender-based violence and empowers all survivors.

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Chair Bacon, Vice Chair Dolan, Ranking Member Thomas and members of the Ohio Senate Judiciary Committee, thank you for this opportunity to provide written testimony in support of Sub. Senate Bill 41. I am providing this testimony on behalf of the Women Helping Women, a dual rape crisis and domestic violence service provider that assisted over 6,000 survivors last year and responded with over 16,500 crisis intervention support services to survivors. Women Helping Women provides medical and legal advocacy, connection to resources, and empowers survivors to work successfully with the criminal justice system. Women Helping Women also recently launched a new groundbreaking domestic violence unit that dispatches advocates to the scene with law enforcement to provide safety and support directly to survivors.

On behalf of my agency, I want to thank Senator Eklund for sponsoring this critically important bill. As this committee knows, Ohio is one of 14 states without a privilege for communications between advocates and survivors. This puts Ohio survivors in a regionally unique, problematic position. If they have been victimized by sexual violence, domestic violence, stalking, or human trafficking, they cannot seek out the assistance that they need without fear of forced disclosure of their communications.

As 36 states and federal regulations have already come to recognize, advocates have crucial role in survivor recovery. Their role is largely specific to cases of sexual and domestic violence, trafficking, and stalking, making it often misunderstood. I would like to take this opportunity to explain this role to the community and enforce the importance of this legislation. To a survivor of the crimes contemplated by SB 41, an advocate is the first point of contact. subpoenaed to testify in court.

WHW believes that a world without gender-based violence is possible and that all members of our caring community can live in a world of equality, health and vitality.

Very often, the advocate is the first person to whom a survivor tells their story. Because the advocate is fully trained on the dynamics and impact of sexual, domestic, and human trafficking crimes, the advocate connects survivors with appropriate resources for reporting crimes to law enforcement, medical care, mental health treatment, legal representation, and crime victim compensation. From there, advocates act as a type of case manager, assisting the survivor in navigating resources over a period of time and creating a source of consistency for the survivor during a painful and confusing process. Advocates provide stability and predictability, using their experience and knowledge to help explain the phases of the criminal justice process, helping survivors prepare for meetings with prosecutors, and making sure the survivor's needs are met during the state's case.

In our experience, survivors who are matched with advocates are more comfortable reporting the crimes against them to police. However, the lack of privilege is still a cause for concern. In 36 other states, survivors may go to a rape crisis center and tell their story without fear that an advocate may later be subpoenaed to testify in court. This makes survivors weary that details of their horrific experiences, statements made about their fears and concerns, and conversations about the impact on mental and physical health will be openly discussed and potentially even published in a court opinion, making it available for public consumption.

For Ohio survivors to receive the highest level of care possible, they must know that their conversations are protected. If survivors cannot speak to advocates in confidence, advocates are much less likely to fully grasp the survivors' needs and are less able to connect them to life saving resources. Therefore, passage of Senate Bill 41 is critical to helping survivors access healing and recovery and increasing survivor reporting to law enforcement to help hold offenders accountable and reduce recidivism.

Thank you for taking the time to review my testimony. I am happy to provide any additional information or answer any questions you may have.