

Chairman Lang, Vice-Chairman Plummer and members of the House Criminal Justice Committee.

My name is Rick Hughes and I live in New Franklin, Ohio.

I'm haunted by the belief that if my son Garrett would have received treatment for drug addiction, instead of a felony conviction, he would be alive today.

Garrett's death could have been prevented.

As the father of a young man who died from an opioid overdose, the grief I live with is shared by thousands of parents, grandparents, siblings, relatives and friends.

We lose 14 people a day on average to overdose deaths in Ohio.

Watching my son grow up, playing baseball from the time he was old enough to swing a bat through high school, hanging out with his friends, going to amusement parks, and just being a kid, no one would have ever predicted he would become gripped by addiction.

Believe me when I say, it could happen to you or your family. The opioid epidemic does not discriminate based on economic status, geography, gender, race, age or political belief.

Garrett struggled with addiction and our family, like so many in Ohio, suffered as well. We prayed and clung to the hope that Garrett would stop using, and there were times when we believed our prayers had been answered.

Yet, our lives were changed forever when Garrett was pulled over for a routine traffic violation, and charged with a felony for low-level drug possession. He lost his driver's license, the opportunity to start college, and it was harder for him to find work.

On the day that Garrett was convicted of a felony, I cried in court. With the proper support, my son could overcome addiction. But a felony conviction was too much, and I knew it. I firmly believe it was the point of no return for my son.

No one was going to punish Garrett into being clean.

He needed help. He needed treatment.

Ohioans with addiction should have access to programs and treatment that allow them to take responsibility for their recovery. But the current laws that saddle them with felonies don't work and must change.

That's why I applaud the efforts of the Senate, and your efforts in the House, to seriously address reforming our drug sentencing laws. I applaud the Ohio Senate for passing Senate Bill 3 and I'm asking members of this committee to do the same.

We need to make simple drug possession a misdemeanor. Felonies should be reserved for serious crimes. Prison is not the place to treat addiction, a public health issue that can only be addressed by expanding rehabilitation programs.

Too many people with addiction have already been tainted with a felony that undermines their recovery and ability to move forward in their lives. True reform means changing the law to make minor drug possession a misdemeanor, and reserve felony convictions for trafficking.

We want our loved ones to recover by achieving dignity through work and other life improvements. Yet treating addiction as a felony puts up lifelong barriers that prevent people from getting jobs, housing and education.

A felony conviction made my son's world small, and took away his dreams and opportunities to achieve self-sufficiency. All he was left with was an addiction that grew worse.

A new rational approach should apply to all simple drug possession cases. The odds of beating addiction are high, and many people attempting to get clean stumble and relapse. Therefore, it is inevitable that many will be charged more than once for simple possession, because we know recovery from addiction is a long road. That should not mean that we continue to burden people with a felony, simply because they've experienced setbacks to recovery.

I urge our policymakers across the state to listen to the people who have fought addiction, to their loved ones who know that treatment is the solution, and to the research that demonstrates felonies for drug possession only make the problem worse.

I am not alone in learning lessons from having a loved one with addiction.

In the beginning, we think we can use tough love and draw a hard line to end addiction, and then we go through the same stages of dashed hopes, sincere promises to get clean that are broken and the gradual realization that this person we love is addicted. There are no easy answers or quick fixes provided by using harsh discipline.

The solutions are complex, and simple punishment isn't an answer.

There is nothing I can do to bring my son Garrett back, although I would give anything to turn back the clock.

Yet as a state, we can take action to prevent any other Ohioan from going through the heartbreak I face everyday from losing a child forever to addiction.

We must change the way we treat people with addiction.

Thank you.