



**Denise Leipold  
Executive Director**

**Testimony in Support of SB3  
House Criminal Justice Committee  
November 19, 2020**

Chairman Lang, Vice Chair Plummer, Ranking Member Leland and members of the House Criminal Justice Committee:

My name is Denise Leipold, and I am the executive director of Right to Life of Northeast Ohio. Thank you for allowing me to submit written testimony in support of Senate Bill 3 which focuses on a comprehensive reform of Ohio's drug sentencing laws.

I normally do not submit testimony on proposed legislation which is outside the scope of my expertise. However, we regularly network with other organizations which overlap with our mission goals, and often support them in their activities and strategies. In support and solidarity with *Americans for Prosperity*, I am presenting this testimony today.

Our organization's mission is to build a culture of life by supporting the sanctity of life from conception through natural death. The main issues which we normally deal with are abortion, embryonic stem cell research, assisted suicide and euthanasia. These issues are direct threats to the immediate right to life. The areas where we overlap with other organizations are concerned mostly with the quality of life. The growing opioid crisis in our country, especially here in Ohio, make this an issue on which we are happy to collaborate.

Statistics from the Centers for Disease Control for 2018 (the most recent data available) have reported a rate of 35.9 opioid-involved overdose deaths in Ohio per 100,000 persons and shows that 3,980 people died that year from an overdose. Only 4 other states had higher rates. Ohio's rate of opioid related overdose deaths is almost twice that of the national average.

The current opioid addiction problem began in the 1990's with the much too frequent issuance of prescription opioids. I don't think anyone could have predicted the tremendous amount of addictions that developed with these drugs. Over the years, programs have developed to combat these addictions and I applaud the efforts that have included timelier tracking of nonfatal and fatal drug overdoses, improving toxicology to better track polysubstance-involved deaths, enhancing linkage to care for people with opioid use disorder and risk for opioid overdose, improving prescription drug monitoring programs, implementing health systems interventions, partnering with public safety, and

implementing other innovative surveillance and prevention activities. While these efforts have been tremendous, none have addressed the side effect of the impact of the opioid crisis to the criminal justice system. Opioid addiction has led to increased criminal acts to obtain or possess non-prescription drugs and increased criminal prosecution with felony charges. A good majority of sick and addicted individuals are prosecuted for the criminal possession of the drugs while the addiction which led to the criminal acts are being ignored, leading to a cyclical pattern of behavior and an overcrowding of the court and prison systems.

In my normal capacity, I deal regularly with abortion vulnerable individuals and present them with life-saving alternatives in an attempt to save the life of a pre-born child. The purpose of Senate Bill 3 has a similar life-saving action. It allows first time offenders who are addicts a chance to save their lives by participating in treatment of their addiction rather than prosecution and jail on felony charges which do not address the underlying problem. Upon successful completion of the treatment program, the slate is wiped clean. This bill would also not make it a revolving door process for addicts who relapse and have multiple arrests. The treatment option is only available one time to them

I was very concerned that passage of this bill would let bigger criminal offenders fall through the cracks and keep them on the streets feeding the addiction of those who are vulnerable. This bill does not do that. It will differentiate between the criminal traffickers who prey on our communities and the addicts who need treatment. It opens up the treatment possibility for the addicts yet maintains the harsh penalties for the drug traffickers.

When a woman chooses to kill her pre-born child through abortion, there is no recourse, and no way to undo the death of the child. It is a reality that I deal with every day. A person who becomes addicted to drugs has most probably not made the choice to become an addict, unlike the mother who makes the choice to abort her child's life. This bill offers addicts who are arrested an opportunity to turn their lives around and have a second chance at life.

My normal job is to educate and advocate on behalf of life so that abortion will never even be considered by women who find themselves unexpectedly pregnant. Likewise, this bill will allow those who become unexpectedly addicted to drugs to keep them from becoming convicted felons and aim to treat their addiction and improve the opioid crisis. We need to break the cycle of addiction and prevent further opioid deaths.

I urge you to pass this bill out of committee to bring to an affirmative vote on the house floor.