

Senate *Judiciary* Committee

Senate Bill 3

Proponent testimony of: Rabbi Rick Kellner
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Good morning Chairperson Eklund, Vice Chairperson Manning, Ranking Member Thomas and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 3. My name is Rick Kellner and I serve as the Rabbi of Congregation Beth Tikvah in Worthington, Ohio and as a leader of the Ohio Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. Our clergy serve more than 43,000 Jews in 34 synagogues in every corner of Ohio. We are a faith-based group, organizing our communities around issues of Jewish values. Over the past year, members of our communities have been working to raise awareness about the challenges of substance abuse disorder and its impact on youth from around the state. In the prior legislative session our members worked to support changes to sentencing laws, expanded record sealing and treatment in lieu of conviction.

Our Jewish text and tradition tell of the challenging story of our people's slavery in Egypt. The Hebrew word for Egypt is *Mitzrayim*, which also means narrow place. The word addiction comes from the Latin root "to give oneself over". Those who are addicted to drugs give themselves over to the forces that trap them in the endless cycle of addiction. They become slaves to their addiction. Every Spring on the holiday of Passover, Jews mark our exodus from slavery. Similarly society celebrates and reveres those who successfully emerge from the narrow place of addiction. When we hear that someone has been sober for 5 years, we cheer. Coming out of the personal Egypt, the personal narrow place, is the story of every recovering addict.

Jewish tradition also teaches about the *evil inclination*: the temptations or impulses that draw an individual repeatedly to use a drug. The temptation renews itself every day and seeks to destroy a person. Jewish text calls someone who can overcome these powerful temptations heroic and mighty. We know that when someone battles addiction, it takes mighty acts on a daily basis to overcome these addictive forces. This happens through meaningful attempts at recovery.

Late last year, we brought a group of temple members to meet with Donn Parsons, the State Senate Legal Council. A young man who grew up at our congregation spoke to him about his own story of addiction and recovery. He had been arrested and kicked out of his home; he had hit bottom. But then he turned his life around. His family supported him in getting his felony drug possession record sealed and now he is only a few months away from earning a masters degree from Northwestern University. When he moved to Chicago for graduate school, he had a difficult time getting apartments because his felony

still appears on private databases. He told Mr. Parsons that having a felony record is like wearing a “scarlet letter” for life. It prevents those who have already paid their debt to society from getting back on their feet. My congregant’s story and our Jewish values teach us that we must view addiction as an illness, not a moral failure.

Right now, our criminal sentencing laws are harmful. They do not view drug addiction as an illness. Their strict nature sends the message that addiction is a moral failure. People must be given the opportunity to work toward recovery. Along with our rabbinic colleagues and congregants, we have spoken with pastors, Judges, elected officials and restored citizens throughout Ohio. We have learned that carrying a felony record for a drug possession is a crime with eternal punishment. With a felony record, people cannot get jobs or housing; they cannot even volunteer in their children’s schools or reunify with their families in some cases. We have heard their stories and we recognize that these individuals should not be punished eternally for their addiction.

We are also guided by the age-old Jewish value of *teshuvah*. We often translate this word as repentance, but the magic of Hebrew tells us it can also mean a *return* to the proper path. In our communities we encounter good people who are still scarred from the mistakes they made in the past. They have paid their debt to society, have rehabilitated their lives and are working to be good upstanding citizens. The scarlet letter is holding them back. What can we do to retroactively change their felonies to misdemeanors so they can be good participating members of society with access to good jobs, housing and more? How can we reintegrate them into the job market, so Ohio can benefit from their talents? What can we do to make our laws reflect this value of *teshuvah*?

Senate Bill 3 has the potential to restore the opportunity for people to get their lives back. Changes to the current law will make access to loans, jobs, housing and education attainable once again. With adequate funds that support recovery, people will be less likely to return to the cycle of addiction, and will be more likely to remain in communities successfully.

Last fall, numerous Jewish congregations around our state held forums to educate about addiction. We knocked on doors to learn stories and talk to people across Ohio. We felt the urgency then and we feel it even more today. Senate Bill 3 is an opportunity to changes people’s lives for the better. It is

important legislation that can give people the chance to emerge from their personal narrow place of addiction and erase the scarlet letter of a felony.

Thank you again for allowing me to testify this morning. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.