

CATHOLIC CONFERENCE OF OHIO

June 12, 2019

Written testimony in support of SB 54:

Prohibiting the use of the death penalty for persons with serious mental illness

Chairman Eklund, vice chairman Manning, ranking member Thomas and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, my name is Jim Tobin. I am an Associate Director with the Catholic Conference of Ohio. The Conference urges your support of SB 54.

The Catholic Church has a long-standing history of opposition to the use of the death penalty. We would prefer not having this debate on who should be exempted from the death penalty. All persons should be exempt. Abolishing the death penalty, while maintaining life imprisonment, would be a just and effective alternative.

The Catholic opposition to the death penalty is ultimately rooted in mercy and is eminently pro-life. In 2018, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* was updated on this matter. It reads:

“Today there is an increasing awareness that the dignity of the person is not lost even after the commission of very serious crimes. In addition, a new understanding has emerged of the significance of penal sanctions imposed by the state. Lastly, more effective systems of detention have been developed, which ensure the due protection of citizens but, at the same time, do not definitively deprive the guilty of the possibility of redemption.

Consequently, the Church teaches, in the light of the Gospel, that the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person, and she works with determination for its abolition worldwide.” #2267.

With that being said, SB 54 is an important and achievable reform of Ohio’s death penalty system. Regardless of your position on the death penalty, we hope each of you will agree that our State ought not be executing persons with clearly defined mental illness. SB 54 offers a narrow path for such a determination. Conducting a pretrial hearing to determine if an individual meets the bill’s limited “conditions” of serious mental illness is a reasonable response. SB 54 will hold guilty individuals with serious mental illness accountable through a life sentence.

We supported changes in the House version of this legislation (HB 136) that removed "major depressive disorder" as one of the qualifying mental illnesses, and clarified that the offender would only be eligible for life without parole.

We thank Chairman Eklund and Senator Williams for sponsoring this legislation. We commend the work of the Ohio Supreme Court Task Force on the Death Penalty, and the leadership of former Justice Evelyn Stratton. We are pleased to join with the many mental health groups that support this legislation.

Thank you for this opportunity