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Chairman LaRe, Vice Chairman Swearingen, and members of the House Criminal Justice Committee, Representative Hillyer and I stand before you today with the distinct honor and privilege of providing sponsor testimony on House Bill 150. As many of you may know, Representative Hillyer and I are very passionate about indigent defense and the importance that defense attorneys play in protecting our civil liberties, many of which are contained in the 5th Amendment, the 6th Amendment, and the 8th Amendment.

In 1963, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Gideon v. Wainwright*, established the principle that under the 6th Amendment to the Constitution the right to counsel is sacred, and if a criminal defendant is unable to afford a lawyer, one must be provided to them.

Here in Ohio, that task often falls on the public defender offices throughout the state. Given that 70% of all defendants facing jail time are indigent, that translates into a high caseload for these public defenders.

These high caseloads mean less time and attention to individual cases, trial delays, and even, in the worst of circumstances, potential wrongful convictions or inappropriate plea deals. In other words, a potential lack of justice, and, as Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

While being a public defender provides a lot of experience for young attorneys, one thing it doesn't provide is enough money to service the average law school debt, which is around \$100,000.

House Bill 150 provides some relief to those seeking to help uphold our 6th Amendment right to legal counsel. It provides a framework that would allow a young attorney to work for the Office of the Ohio Public Defender while still receiving a benefit to help them offset the cost of legal education. The financial benefits are up to \$30,000 for a three year service obligation, and, for an additional fourth and fifth year of service, up to \$20,000 more, for a total maximum contribution of \$50,000 toward a young lawyer's existing law school student debt.

In addition to the requirements, Representative Leland and I would like to add a point of clarity. The Public Defender Loan Repayment Program is not for rural areas only. The program can be utilized in counties that are determined to be a “shortage area.” However, most underserved areas happen to be rural counties, but the bill does not explicitly limit it to such.

However, coming from rural eastern Ohio, I have often seen the challenges our local public defender office has had in keeping young attorneys to stay with the office. It is our belief that House Bill 150 will help end the brain-drain that occurs in these particular types of areas in the state, while upholding the constitutional demands under *Gideon v. Wainwright* and, ultimately, to provide good indigent defense services by attracting top-tier talent to these jobs.

Representative Leland and I believe it is also important to note that House Bill 150 is designed in a very similar fashion to those loan repayment programs created for many medical professions, such as doctors and dentists, which encourage folks to help aid underserved areas of the state while still being able to pay off the debt obligations they may have incurred.

In addition to creating the Public Defender Loan Repayment Program, House Bill 150 will also create a 16-member Indigent Defense Task Force Study Committee. The committee will study Ohio’s indigent defense system and provide recommendations to the General Assembly regarding the delivery, structure, and funding of indigent defense not later than one year after the effective date of the bill.

By passing House Bill 150, we will not only enable and empower public defender offices to hire excellent staff to serve the community at large through indigent defense, but also provide them with the ability to retain that talent into the future.

Chairman LaRe, Vice Chair Swearingen, and members of the House Criminal Justice Committee, Representative Leland and I thank you again for the opportunity to testify on House Bill 150, and we will be glad to answer any questions that you may have.