

Proponent Testimony
Ohio House Criminal Justice Committee
House Bill 121
Hope Carver, Vice President of Programming
Women Helping Women

Chair LaRe, Vice Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Leland and Members of the Ohio House Criminal Justice Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of House Bill 121. My name is Hope Carver and I am the Vice President of Programming at Women Helping Women. Women Helping Women is a non-profit agency serving survivors of intimate partner violence, sexual assault, and stalking in Southwest Ohio. Specifically, we provide services in Adams, Brown, Butler, and Hamilton counties. I have been involved in serving survivors of violence for nearly 20 years and remain just as committed today to this work, which is why I am before you today.

I am here on behalf of Women Helping Women to ask that you pass this critical piece of legislation to allow survivors of intimate partner sexual violence equal protection in the state code that survivors of non-intimate partner sexual violence receive. As an organization that serves over 15,000 survivors annually, we often see the effect of the current loophole on survivors and families in the counties that we serve. Our advocates rely on a variety of safety planning tools and options in the criminal and civil legal systems to help survivors seeking support. By excluding sexual violence that happens in a relationship from protection under Ohio's laws, we are not able to provide the same level of support or options for married Ohioans. Not only are survivors prevented from receiving the help they need, they are also receiving implicit messages that what happened to them is not wrong, because it is not a crime.

We know that sexual violence is wrong, regardless of the relationship type or whether a marriage license is involved. Both sexual violence and intimate partner violence are about power and control, and include many similar tactics to keep survivors from coming forward. This is why it is so critical to correct the law and remove the phrase, "not the spouse of the offender" from our sexual offenses. More than 2/3 of survivors never report their sexual assault for a variety of reasons, many of which are due to the barriers inherent in our criminal and civil legal systems as well as the stigma surrounding sexual violence. Given how difficult it already is for survivors to disclose, why would we uphold an additional, unnecessary barrier in our laws?

Women Helping Women is dedicated to advocating for the needs of all survivors. All of the survivors that we serve deserve the same options for healing and justice, no matter their marital status. The passage of this legislation will allow Ohio to correct harmful and outdated norms in its code regarding a married person's agency over their body and ability to consent, and allow married survivors to have the same protections from sexual violence as those who are unmarried.

Thank you for your time and attention to this crucial legislation. I am happy to answer any questions by email, at hcarver@womenhelpingwomen.org.