



House Criminal Justice Committee
Proponent Testimony
Ohio House Bill 183
Written Testimony Only

Kwame Ajamu

September 22, 2021

Dear Chairman LaRe, Vice Chair Swearigen, Ranking Member Leland, and members of the House Criminal Justice Committee:

My name is Kwame Ajamu and I am a resident of Richmond Heights, Ohio. Thank you for the opportunity to submit proponent testimony on Ohio House Bill 183. That I am even able to address you today is no small miracle. I was sentenced to death at the age of 17 and sent to death row in Southern Ohio Correctional Facility in Lucasville. I was completely innocent of the unfortunate killing that led to my wrongful arrest, wrongful conviction and wrongful death sentence. I was really just a regular Cleveland kid, hanging with my brother, Wiley Bridgeman, and my friend, Ricky Jackson, when we found ourselves in the wrong place at the wrong time and were snatched up in a nightmare.

I was released from prison after 28 years and continued the fight to prove our innocence, but it took 39 years before we succeeded and were fully exonerated of all charges. I'm heartbroken to say that my brother passed away three months ago. Though our exoneration in 2014 brought him home, he never recovered from the trauma of his 39 years of wrongful incarceration. It is in his memory and in his name that I ask you today to support House Bill 183. Let us learn from the pain and suffering my brother, I, and many others have endured. Let us end Ohio's death penalty.

Ohio is home to 11 death row exonerees. That means for every five people the state of Ohio has executed, one has been found innocent. In my case, police misconduct and coercion led a young boy to give a false witness against me. Sadly, my case is not at all unique. The recent "Innocence Epidemic" report from the Death Penalty Information Center found that of the 185 people nationally who were innocent and sentenced to death, 69% of the cases included "official misconduct by police, prosecutors, or other government officials." And for those of us death row exonerees who are Black, that number jumps to 78.8% of us having official misconduct as a cause of our wrongful convictions.

Put simply – the only way to ensure that Ohio does not execute an innocent person is to repeal the death penalty.

Today, I live in Richmond Heights with my wife, who herself is the family member of a murder victim. We are active members of the community and we work for abolition each day. We do not believe that Ohio needs the death penalty in order to be safe and a majority of Ohioans share this belief.

I am the Board Chairman of Witness to Innocence, an organization of people who were all wrongfully convicted, sentenced to death and later exonerated. On behalf of Witness to Innocence, I urge our state and our nation to stop ignoring what is wrong in our criminal justice system and move forward together in peace and love. I have a deep hope that we will see our wonderful state of Ohio repeal the death penalty in 2022.

I ask you to consider my testimony and vote yes on this critically important bill. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.