

Good morning, Chairman LaRe, Vice Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Leland, and members of the House Criminal Justice Committee. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today in favor of House Bill 183, and thank you, Representative Schmidt, for championing this important legislation. My name is Stephanie Ranade Krider and I am the former executive director of Ohio Right to Life. Today I am speaking as a private citizen still very active and interested in advocating for human dignity.

I am here today because I believe in the sanctity of life. That includes the life of a baby in a mother's womb, the life of someone with terminal illness, and, yes, the life of someone who has committed horrific violence.

Much like the debate over abortion, I think the death penalty, for many people, is merely conceptual. Many people do not spend a lot of time diving deeper into this issue because we're not confronted with its realities in our everyday life. If we ourselves do not have a relative in prison or have not been involved in the criminal justice system, or have not ourselves faced the threat of death at the hands of the state, it's easy not to think much about whether it is the right of the state to condemn someone to die. We learn that an eye for an eye is justice served, and perhaps never think much past that. With the facts presented and those that will be presented to this committee about wrongful convictions, exonerations, and racial inequalities in our death penalty system however, we can challenge the notion of simple retribution and instead begin to see the reality of what the death penalty is and how it operates in Ohio. The death penalty is not moral, nor is it just.

Reading Bryan Stevenson's book, *Just Mercy*, ultimately convinced me this issue is of equal importance for those of us concerned with issues of justice and human dignity. The book traces the death penalty to the darkest chapters in our country's history: slavery, the lynching of Black men, and other terrible atrocities that spring from the ugliness of slavery, racism and our past. In Ohio, we are not so far from that past as we may think. The numbers betray a system that overwhelmingly values white life over Black life. In fact, Black defendants are twice as likely to receive a death sentence if their victim is white. From the time executions began again in 1999 until 2010, there were 38 executions--[none were white people executed for killing a person of color](#), despite the fact that [half of all homicide victims nationally are Black](#). Even today, over half of the people on Ohio's death row are Black, while Black people make up only 13% of the total population of Ohio. It is said that history does not repeat itself so much as it rhymes. As long as the death penalty remains on the books in Ohio, we are complicit in this horrific legacy of racial violence. We ought to strive to respect all life equally.

Stevenson's book mostly follows the story of Walter McMillan, an innocent (ultimately exonerated) Black man who was sent to death row in Alabama. We know that Ohio has a particularly terrible track record when it comes to sentencing innocent people to die, especially people of color. Of the 11 people Ohio has sent to death row, eight were Black. Five of those people, all Black men, were from the same county-- Cuyahoga-- which is [second in the nation](#) for wrongful death sentences. It would be difficult to deny the role race played in those wrongful convictions. Although the death penalty is an affront to human dignity regardless of innocence,

the idea that we could have executed someone who did not commit the crime is unconscionable. As Americans who value human dignity - regardless of race - we should demand better. Ohio can do better. Ohio must do better.

The problem is not only deficiencies in the system that prevent justice from being carried out. The problem also lies in the truth that all human life is equally deserving of dignity. Our laws are inconsistent in this regard both for unborn life and for those subject to the death penalty.

It's true that the arguments between defending the right to life of the unborn are not entirely the same as defending the right to life of someone who has committed a horrific crime. It is difficult to say that people who have taken a life should be able to live out their own until natural death. However, it isn't a leap in logic. If others believe, as I do, that all human lives are deserving of dignity as image-bearers of our Creator, as people who hold *all* life sacred, we can defend both. We must speak out for human dignity and against efforts to rob others of it.

Service of justice from the death penalty is a fiction. Our justice system does not offer true justice. The reality is that the death penalty targets people of color, the mentally ill, those who live in certain counties, those who can't afford proper representation, and other vulnerable people. The fact is, Ohio can keep our communities safe and hold people accountable-- even those who have themselves taken a life-- without the death penalty.

I want to thank the committee for allowing me the chance to speak on this issue today. I believe that a vote for House Bill 183 is a vote that affirms the inherent value in all life.