

# ***TRACY GRINSTEAD-EVERLY, J.D.***

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★ ADVOCACY ★

## ***Grinstead-Everly Consulting***

***11320 Exmoor Drive ~ Concord Township, Ohio ~ 44077***

***tgrinsteadeverly@gmail.com ~ 512.636.3110***

### **Written Testimony in Support of HB 254 Ohio House Families, Aging and Human Services Committee June 24, 2021**

Thank you, Chair and Members of the Family, Aging, and Human Services Committee, for advancing HB 254 for hearing, and for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of this important legislation.

My name is Tracy Grinstead-Everly. I am an attorney with over 30 years of experience in the field of intimate partner violence, through direct representation of survivors, and decades of systems reform. I have helped conduct high risk and fatality reviews of domestic violence cases; drafted and implemented critical legislation; trained legal professionals, advocates and community allies; and helped systems officials develop policies and practices that prioritize safety and accountability.

I also Chair the Family and Sexual Violence Committee of the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland Section. NCJW is a grassroots organization of volunteers and advocates who turn progressive ideals into action. Inspired by Jewish values, NCJW strives for social justice by improving the quality of life for women, children, and families and by safeguarding individual rights and freedoms. One of our guiding principles affirms that all individuals have the right to live in a peaceful world, free from violence and persecution. Advancing the well-being and status of women by supporting laws, policies, programs, and services that protect every woman from all forms of abuse, exploitation, harassment, discrimination, and violence is at the core of our work. NCJW helped draft and pass the original Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), the first major federal law dedicated to end domestic violence, sexual assault, and other kinds of intimate partner violence, and has championed all subsequent authorizations thereof. In that spirit, I, personally, and on behalf of NCJW, support Ohio HB 254, to create statutory guidelines for domestic violence fatality review teams.

Nationally, more than three women and one man are murdered by their intimate partners in this country every day.<sup>1</sup> According to the most recent annual domestic violence fatality report,

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<sup>1</sup> United States Bureau of Justice Statistics.

109 Ohioans died last year as a result of domestic violence. 109 friends, neighbors, coworkers and loved ones, ranging in age from 2 to 82,<sup>2</sup> were murdered by someone who claimed to love them. Some died alone. Others were murdered alongside their children or others who tried to intervene. Four minor children and one law enforcement officer were among the 13 secondary victims killed in intimate partner murders in Ohio last year.<sup>3</sup>

Prior to their deaths, many victims suffered in silence, thinking they had no options. Nationally, half of intimate partner homicide victims had received no or minimal support services.<sup>4</sup> It is a travesty that not everyone is aware of lifesaving resources. It is perhaps more horrifying, however, that many took the risks of leaving, turning to established systems designed to protect them, and died anyway. Nationally, 48% of women killed by their intimate partners utilized the criminal justice system for concerns about ongoing intimate partner violence and stalking in the year before their murders.<sup>5</sup> In at least 27% of last year's domestic violence fatalities in Ohio, the victim had ended or was in the process of ending the relationship.<sup>6</sup> At least 20 perpetrators of intimate partner murder in Ohio last year had been previously charged with or convicted of domestic violence.<sup>7</sup> While the murderer bears the ultimate responsibility, systemic failure to prevent these deaths is unacceptable. That is the core principle behind of HB 254 – and why it must be passed.

Policy approaches are associated with lower rates of intimate partner homicides. Domestic violence fatality reviews have proved a promising best practice since the early 1990s, one already initiated in approximately half a dozen counties in Ohio.<sup>8</sup> HB 254 allows local control while establishing guidelines to standardize protocols for a systemic review of domestic violence homicides through a lens of prevention and accountability. Promoting interdisciplinary cooperation, collaboration, and communication can transform the way agencies and stakeholders understand and respond to domestic violence.

Domestic violence fatality review teams improve relationships and service delivery. Meetings provide team members an opportunity to develop a broad understanding of particular cases while exploring patterns, including intersectional and overlapping issues and competing interests faced by victims and those who serve them. Fatality review provides an opportunity to coordinate efforts and maximize limited resources. Statutory confidentiality protections such as those in HB 254 encourage candid conversations, allowing those in positions to influence policy to take inventory of existing strengths in response, identify barriers to safety, and develop more survivor-centered interventions.

Under HB 254, Ohio would join other states in enacting a best practice model dedicated to prevent future domestic violence and domestic homicide; enhance victim safety; and hold accountable both the perpetrators of domestic violence and the multiple agencies and organizations that come into contact with the parties. HB 254 provides Ohio with an

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<sup>2</sup> *Ohio Domestic Violence Fatalities, July 1, 2019 - June 30, 2020*, Ohio Domestic Violence Network.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> Campbell, J. C., Webster, D., Koziol-McLain, J., Block, C. R., Campbell, D., Curry, M. A., Gary, F., McFarlane, J., Sachs, C., Sharps, P., Ulrich, Y., & Wilt, S. A. (2003, November). *Assessing Risk Factors for Intimate Partner Homicide*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice (NIJ).

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> National Domestic Violence Fatality Review Initiative.

opportunity to send a clear message of zero tolerance for domestic violence, and gives communities a formal opportunity for honest review on which to base effective reform.

The harsh bottom line is this: Our existing response to domestic violence is failing, and people are dying. HB 254 provides an opportunity to learn from our mistakes, make impactful, systemic change to focus our efforts – and save lives.

On behalf of myself, NCJW, and the survivors we support and for whom we advocate, I urge you to pass this bill. Thank you for your time and consideration.