



## **Advocates for Ohio's Future**

House Bill 55 - Proponent Testimony

House Government Oversight Committee - March 25, 2021

Chairman Wilkin, Vice Chair White, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the House Government Oversight Committee, my name is Susan Jagers. I am the director of the Ohio Poverty Law Center and I am here today in my role as an Executive Committee member of Advocates for Ohio's Future (AOF). Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments in support of HB 55 which creates a procedure for the General Assembly to conduct session and committee hearings virtually.

AOF is a nonprofit, nonpartisan coalition of over 500 state and local health and human services policy, advocacy and provider organizations that strive to strengthen families and communities through public funding for health, human services, and early care & education. We work to empower and support nonprofit organizations in the critical work they do, especially as it relates to lifting up the most vulnerable among us.

As a result of this pandemic, many Ohioans continue to struggle. Families across our state are challenged to maintain stable, affordable housing, cover utilities, obtain safe care for children during school hours and beyond; and find meaningful work after losing their jobs due to COVID-19. While our state and communities continue to recover, it is critical that you expand the ways in which Ohioans of all ages, abilities and zip codes can more easily engage with committee members on important policy decisions that impact their lives and recovery.

On a good day, it is difficult for most people to take time off work, get to Columbus, find and pay for parking, and wait in committees in order to testify about how a bill will affect them and their families. With the added danger of a highly transmissible infectious disease, the challenge of in-person testimony is too great.

In-person testimony is critical to the process of open lawmaking. Written testimony, though a necessary option, does not allow committee members to engage with witnesses to truly understand the issues.

House Bill 55 would allow citizens to testify and interact with lawmakers via video conference during the time of emergency as declared by the Governor. Presently, this would help mitigate potential COVID-19 exposure at the Statehouse while still providing, and improving, access to testify in committees. It also means that Ohioans who have preexisting conditions (or loved ones who do), are educating their kids from home, or are searching for employment, are better able to participate in their government at this crucial time.

The House Economic Recovery Taskforce successfully met last spring via video conference and its proceedings were televised on the Ohio Channel. Committee Rooms are already outfitted with equipment to broadcast meetings and special exceptions have been made in the past so that people may testify via video.

States all around the country and local boards and governments across Ohio, have made changes in order to more easily accommodate virtual meetings while maintaining transparency and accountability to the public. According to an Associated Press survey, only “13 legislative chambers in eight states – Alabama, Arkansas, Iowa, Indiana, Louisiana, Missouri, Nebraska and Ohio – still do not allow people outside the Capitol to testify remotely by phone or video during committee hearings. Most of those chambers let the public attend hearings in-person, but some people have been reluctant to do so because of COVID-19.”<sup>i</sup> Ohio is far behind the curve nationwide and is the only Midwest state to not allow this option.

Though we support House Bill 55 as written, we ask the committee to consider making the practice of virtual committee testimony a permanent fixture of a more open and inclusive legislature in Ohio. Allowing for real time, virtual participation in committees in perpetuity will help Ohioans who have historically faced barriers accessing the legislative process. Older adults and people with disabilities are often unable to provide testimony due to issues with transportation, employment, and finding care givers to support their needs. Allowing more access to this process through virtual testimony and live captioning would allow more older advocates and those with disabilities to be engaged on legislation impacting their lives.

As you consider Ohio’s path forward towards an equitable recovery, we ask that you elevate our state’s greatest resource—our people—in the decision-making process. Making these small but necessary changes will ensure the Statehouse truly is “The People’s House.”

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of HB 55. We look forward to working with you on policies that stabilize families and allow our communities to come back safely and successfully.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/legislature-state-legislature-coronavirus-pandemic-4d6cf5821b44cb0ce70587305d5e1175>