



Written Testimony to the Ohio House Government Oversight Committee

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House Bill 55 (Kelly) – Proponent

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on House Bill 55 to **permit citizens to testify and interact with lawmakers via video conference**. As an organization that advocates for low-income Ohioans and special needs populations, we think the practice of virtual committee testimony should occur as soon as possible and remain a stable fixture of an open and inclusive legislature to ensure everyone has the opportunity to have their voices heard.

As a result of this pandemic, many of our neighbors continue to struggle. Families across our state are challenged to maintain affordable housing, cover utilities, and obtain safe care for children during school hours and beyond. Ohioans are also fraught with finding work after losing their jobs due to COVID-19. Ohio still had 307,000 fewer jobs in January 2021 than a year before. The people working in low-wage industries have been hit the hardest. The Census Bureau estimates 241,000 Ohio households are behind on rent, and 274,000 are behind on their mortgages.

While you deliberate and take action on behalf of people in our state, 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 livelihoods. Taking time off work in the middle of the day is difficult for most people, not to mention waiting 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 can be overcome with amazing technology that is widely available.

Allowing more access to the legislative process through virtual testimony and live captioning would allow more older advocates and those with disabilities participate in the democratic process. Unfortunately, written testimony simply can't take the place of in-person testimony. The opportunity for committee members to engage with witnesses to truly understand the issues should be a priority. And today, this virtual option would help mitigate potential COVID-19 exposure at the Statehouse.

We support this effort to expand access to the legislative process, especially for very low-income Ohioans, who may be struggling to find housing or employment or childcare. Now, more than ever, they need this chance to share their voice.