



Sarah Inskeep
Ohio House Bill 55 Proponent Testimony
Ohio House Government Oversight Committee
Thursday, March 25, 2021

Chairman Wilkin, Vice Chair White, Ranking Member Sweeney, thank you for allowing me to submit pre-recorded virtual testimony in support of House Bill 55.

My name is Sarah Inskeep and I'm the Ohio State Policy and Movement Building Director with URGE: Unite for Reproductive and Gender Equity. URGE is a multi-state Reproductive Justice organization led by and for young Black and Brown queer, transgender, and gender-nonconforming people in the South, Midwest, which includes our work in Ohio.

In the beginning of 2021 when Ohio's COVID-19 cases were continuing to rise, URGE was one of the over 75 local and state organizations that to sign on and send to a letter calling on Speaker Cupp and Senate President Huffman to implement a rule changes requiring every person in the Ohio Statehouse to wear a mask and to provide virtual engagement opportunities for constituents and organizations to virtually provide oral testimony during committee hearings and sessions. While we are encouraged by vaccine eligibility expansion for Ohioans, we are not yet out of this pandemic. Just earlier this week, Ohio reached more than one million total reported Coronavirus cases since the start of the pandemic.¹ Considering this grim milestone for our state and the fact that cases continue to fluctuate, the need and urgency for virtual testimony in the Ohio legislature remains.

Whether it's throughout the COVID-19 pandemic or not – democracy works best when all of us are involved and when all of us have equitable access to it! The federal government, other state legislatures, and city governments have figured out how to adopt virtual engagement processes so that no matter a constituent's zip code, income, health, ability, or caregiving status – they're able to have their voice heard in the democratic process. We, as everyday Ohioans, have made significant life changes in the past year – the most of which have resulted an increase in virtual engagement. School, medical appointments, social activities, and more are all things that we learned to do well virtually. It's overdue that the Ohio legislature follow suit.

While the scope House Bill 55 is to allow for virtual engagement options during a declared state of emergency, we at URGE would like to see virtual engagement options codified into Ohio Revised Code. This would help minimize the countless logistical and financial barriers that constituents face when attempting to engage in the state legislative process. Ohioans must take off work, travel far distances, pay for parking, go through security, navigate directions once inside of the building, and hope to get to where they're going on time to attend a hearing or testify. This is no small feat, especially for someone who has never been to the Ohio Statehouse before.

¹ Cleveland.com. As Expected, Ohio Surpasses 1 Million Coronavirus Cases: Monday Update. Published March 22, 2021. <https://www.cleveland.com/open/2021/03/as-expected-ohio-surpasses-1-million-coronavirus-cases-monday-update.html>. Accessed March, 23, 2021.



Since 2015, I personally and professionally have helped organize young people from across Ohio to come to the legislature to provide testimony. When I reflect on the impact virtual testimony could have for the people I've worked with, I think about Lesley Mayzlik who was in her twenties, had a life-threatening illness, and was wheelchair-bound. Prior to entering hospice, she dedicated what little time she had left to advocating and fighting for reproductive health and rights. She wanted nothing more than to share her story and provide opponent testimony for the six-week abortion ban in-person. It was always difficult for her to arrange transportation from outside of Columbus to travel to the Statehouse, be received and escorted inside only to have to take different route to get to the committee rooms because of her wheelchair.

I think about Kasey from East Liverpool who was unable to attend a hearing to testify in-person because of receiving notice of a committee hearing being rescheduled to earlier in the week and didn't have reliable transportation with such short notice to travel over two hours to the Statehouse.

I think about Noah and Rita, two University of Toledo students, I worked with last year who wanted to come any testify in-person. One had to take an unpaid day off work and the other who needed to have a written excuse to miss class only to get to the Statehouse and have a committee not start on time and be told that they were limiting testimony to three minutes when it was previously told it would be a five-minute allowance. In all these examples, I imagine that the ongoing consequences of the pandemic has only exacerbated these individual's - and tens of thousands of other Ohioans – conditions.

To this day, our coalition letter has received no acknowledge, no response, and no action from Statehouse leadership. Their willful neglect – and in many cases efforts to actively undermine COVID-19 precautions – is a demonstration to our coalition, which represents and works directly with young people, people with disabilities, religious leaders, medical professionals, educators, LGBTQ+ individuals, frontline workers and laborers, rural and Appalachian communities, and more that they simply don't care about their health, safety, or voices on issues that they're considering legislation on.

Ohioans deserve better. We are so grateful for Rep. Kelly's leadership in sponsoring this bill and thank her and the other members who have support this effort for their care for Ohioan's health and our ability to safely participate in the legislative process now and in the future. I urge members of this committee to help move forward with this commonsense solution, keep democracy open for the constituents you represent, and vote yes on House Bill 55. Thank you.