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**Testimony in Support of HB55
Susan Jagers, Director
Ohio Poverty Law Center
Ohio House Government Oversight Committee
March 25, 2021**

Chair Wilkin, Vice Chair White, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the House Government Oversight Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of House Bill 55. My name is Susan Jagers and I am the director of the Ohio Poverty Law Center. Our mission is to reduce poverty and increase justice by protecting and expanding the legal rights of Ohioans living, working, and raising their families in poverty.

House Bill 55 permits committees to meet, and therefore accept testimony, virtually during the time of emergency as declared by the Governor.

Currently, the House and Senate do not allow remote or virtual committee testimony. While we appreciate the efforts that are being made to make in-person committee hearings safe, many Ohioans do not feel like attending a public meeting is a safe and healthy option. Ohioans need a way to participate in the legislative process that does not involve attending committees in-person.

We have seen solutions used during the pandemic by the Controlling Board and the Economic Recovery Taskforce. Both of these bodies permitted witnesses to comment and answer questions virtually.

Allowing virtual testimony ensures all Ohioans safe and equitable access to the legislative process. It is difficult for most people to take time off work, make their way to Columbus, find and pay for parking, and wait in committees in order to testify about how a bill will impact their life and that of their family. With the added concern of COVID-19, the challenge of in-person testimony is too great. Additionally, some employers are not permitting their employees to attend in-person meetings including statehouse committees.

Live testimony is critical to the process of open lawmaking. Written testimony is not an adequate substitute as it does not allow committee members to engage witnesses to truly understand the issues.

Our democracy works best when we can all participate. We urge you to support HB55 and virtual committee testimony.