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Proponent Testimony for House Bill 55  
Ohio House Government Oversight Committee

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Chairman Wilkin, Vice Chair White, Ranking Member Sweeney, and other committee members:

My name is Katy Shanahan, I use she/her pronouns, and I want to thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify in strong support of House Bill 55. I serve as the Ohio State Director for All On The Line, a grassroots advocacy campaign that is part of a national effort to end gerrymandering and to restore fairness to the redistricting process.

Democracy works best when all Ohioans have a seat at the decision-making table, when we are given equitable access to it, and we are allowed to actually engage with our elected representatives, so that we can raise the needs and concerns of our communities.

Ohioans deserve the ability to participate in the legislative process safely. Especially for such an aggressively gerrymandered states like Ohio, the ability for us to participate in important, nuanced dialogue with our legislators during hearings is critical because it's often the only time we have to actually be heard by our representatives. And as we move closer to hosting public hearings - of which I hope there are very, very many - for the redistricting process - something that will impact all of us for the next decade - it is essential that we are providing an accessible path for all Ohioans to engage.

Unfortunately, even in the midst of a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic that has killed nearly 18,000 Ohioans, our state does not allow its residents to provide virtual testimony. And Ohio is behind the times on this front -- it's one of just eight states across the country that doesn't allow virtual access to its legislature for testimony. Going to the Statehouse in person to testify on bills is neither a safe nor feasible option for many, especially when some legislators themselves refuse to wear masks. We absolutely need virtual testimony and to pass HB55 to establish it as a norm for all legislative hearings.

What's interesting is that even though the public isn't allowed to utilize virtual testimony, the legislature has, in fact, used virtual hearings previously. Just last year, for example, a joint

legislative economic recovery task force held a virtual hearing where it allowed multiple witnesses from across the state to provide testimony through a Zoom meeting that was broadcast live through the Ohio Channel. Similarly, the Ohio Controlling Board regularly meets via Zoom and allows its witnesses and legislative members to attend and to provide testimony virtually. I have every faith that this robust body can meet the moment and determine how best to utilize existing technology to ensure that any Ohioan who wants to can provide testimony safely.

Ohioans, no matter where we live -- from the Ohio River to Lake Erie, from Springfield to Marietta -- deserve the opportunity to engage in a safe, accessible dialogue with our legislators about the bills that impact every facet of our lives. Virtual testimony is what's necessary to keep our state's democracy open and safe for all of us.

I also stand before you today representing one of more than 75 advocacy, labor, community, and voting rights organizations who penned a letter to legislative leadership in January asking for virtual testimony for all legislative hearings. As a coalition, we have been meeting (like so many Ohioans during the last year) via Zoom on a regular basis for months to connect with each other about how best to advocate for this commonsense proposal. I'd like now to share with you a pre-recorded mock hearing that we put together that features oral testimony from a few advocates from across the state. We organized this mock hearing to highlight just how easy it is to use existing technology to elevate the voices of Ohioans in an accessible and safe manner on this important issue through the legislative process and in hopes that it can serve as an example for how future hearings can and should be run.

Thank you, again, for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony on this matter. I'd be happy to take any questions you may have.