



TESTIMONY OF:

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IN SUPPORT OF:

House Bill 55
Virtual Testimony
Senate Government Oversight Committee
March 24, 2021

Chair Wilkin, Vice Chair White, Ranking Minority Member Sweeney, and distinguished members of the Ohio House Government Oversight Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today in support of Ohio House Bill 55.

My name is Erin Ryan and I serve as the Managing Director of the Ohio Women's Public Policy Network (WPPN), a coalition of nearly 40 organizations that advocate for public policy solutions that build economic opportunity for women and families. We believe that the measure of success for our state and communities is largely determined by the success of Ohio's women. Therefore, policymakers must advance public policies centered in equity, fairness, and justice that address the following issue areas:

1. Promoting an economic security agenda for women;
2. Ensuring fairness and opportunity in the workplace; and
3. Improving women's health and well-being

These policy goals guide WPPN's work and shaped our interest in testifying today as a proponent of House Bill 55 exactly because of the impact that this legislation would have on our ability to voice our concern or support of legislation, share our policy expertise on specific bills, and advocate on behalf of Ohio women when a bill within our policy agenda is being debated in a committee. We were proud to stand with more than 75 organizations from across the state that voiced the need in a letter sent to lawmakers for our state legislature to provide the option for virtual testimony during hearings. Now, House Bill 55 creates a thoughtful approach to make this a reality in Ohio.

This legislation would provide a bridge for our organization to effectively participate in the legislative process of bills during the pandemic; a time when women's employment and economic opportunity has been decimated and the needs and experiences of women remains even more important to the legislative discussion. House Bill 55 would also align with our goal of ensuring that women's voices, particularly women of color and women with low-wage jobs, are centered in policymaking as it would address barriers that Ohio women face in being able to engage in the process.

As the coronavirus pandemic highlighted the long-standing disparities facing marginalized communities, it also shone a spotlight on the reality that our state legislative process creates unequal opportunities for Ohioans to have their voices heard. The voice of the working mother juggling her responsibilities at work and the needs of her children in remote schooling are crucial important to the policy discussions at the Statehouse. The experience of the wife providing care for her husband, facing limited in-home options during the pandemic, must be part of the legislative process on issues affecting her life and the care she provides. The small business owner doing everything they can to keep their doors open through the pandemic should be able to share how a policy will impact them, their employees, and their business. The opinion of the working Ohioan putting in more than 40 hours a week at a low-wage job, yet still struggling to make ends meet, deserves to have their voice included in the debate on bills.

And yet, these voices and more are being shut out of the full legislative process without a virtual testimony option, particularly during the pandemic. As cases of the virus continue to remain at high levels in Ohio, the participation of advocates, policy experts, and everyday Ohioans in our democracy remains at risk as the ability to provide in-person testimony at the Statehouse during this time is unsafe and inaccessible. Additionally, for parents and caregivers, especially women, now facing increased caregiving duties for their children, elders, and loved ones, the ability to provide in-person testimony can be challenging, if not impossible - particularly for individuals who live outside of the Central Ohio area.

While we understand that House Bill 55 is focused specifically on virtual testimony options during the pandemic, the need for this legislation extends into the future as well. Many of the challenges to being able to provide in-person testimony at a committee hearing existed even before the pandemic, and they will remain after it is safe to resume large in-person meetings again. From the difficulty in taking off from work (let alone being able to do so with pay), to finding back-up care for a child or loved one typically under someone's care, to the time and costs associated with traveling to Columbus, there remain insurmountable barriers for many Ohioans to providing testimony on a bill that will undoubtedly impact their life.

As our state legislature continues the work of advancing public policies that determine the future of Ohioans, we urge this committee to embrace the opportunity to provide a virtual testimony option for your constituents to make their voices heard and engage in the legislative process. This will create a more active democracy and involved citizenry, bring forth the experiences and voices of Ohioans who are often left out of the process, and provide for more effective and informed debate on bills. **On behalf of the Ohio Women's Public Policy Network, I respectfully urge the committee to support and advance House Bill 55.**

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I am available to answer any questions by email at ryan@innovationohio.org.

Sincerely,
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