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Laura Lanese

State Representative

23rd Ohio House District

Senate Government Oversight and Reform Committee: HB 449

Chair Roegner, Vice Chair McColley, Ranking Member Craig, and Members of the Senate Government Oversight and Reform Committee, thank you for giving me the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 449, which would designate the second Monday of October as Italian Heritage Day.

Ohio has a long list of commemorative days that recognizes the contributions of a wide variety of individuals, groups, causes, and events. Today we are offering this bill to honor the exceptional contributions that those of Italian descent have made in Ohio and in the United States. Nearly 18 million Americans or six percent of the population are of Italian heritage, making them the fourth largest European ethnic group in the US. In Ohio, the numbers are similar; nearly 700,000 or 6.4% of the Ohio population can trace their roots back to Italy. Their contributions to this country and this state are far reaching.

They were the backbone of the Industrial Revolution and have greatly contributed to all aspects of our society. These immigrants and their descendants have enhanced the sciences, the arts, sports, businesses, the military, and, of course, our cuisine to name a few. For example, in science, there is Enrico Fermi, creator of the world's first nuclear reactor. In music there's everyone from Frank Sinatra to Lady Gaga. In literature there's David Baldacci and Tomie dePaola to name just a couple. In business, the founders of Bank of America, Subway, Home Depot and AirBnB are all Italian Americans. In sports, there are Rocky

Marciano, Joe DiMaggio, and Mario Andretti. In the military, there are the thirteen Congressional Medal of Honor recipients of Italian heritage. And in politics, Italian Americans definitely shine. Both the current US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and the current Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy have Italian roots.

And as Ohio is known as a microcosm of the US, we see that Ohioans of Italian heritage have achieved similar levels of success. From Dean Martin, who was born Dino Paul Crocetti to Anthony Celebrezze and Governor Michael DiSalle to Dante, “Gluefingers” Lavelli, we see their impact in Ohio’s culture, politics, sports, and the arts. But we know that the most significant contributions to our state come from the ordinary Buckeyes of Italian heritage, who have been the backbone of building this great state as day laborers, as cooks, as garment workers, and as bridge builders. These Ohioans, who were discriminated against, who had immigration laws dedicated to keeping them out, who faced extraordinary challenges not only survived, but thrived.

Italians are known for their attachment to their faith, their families, and their food. I could spend a lot of time talking about Italians and food, but we’re all familiar, some of us too familiar, with the likes of Napolitano pizza, fettucine alfredo, minestrone, and risotto. Just look at all the cooking shows hosted by numerous Italian Americans including Rachel Ray and Columbus’ own Guy Fieri. We see Italians continuing contributions in the many community organizations in Ohio, like the Sons and Daughters of Italy, the Northern Ohio Italian American Association, the Southwest Italian American Club and the Piave Club with members throughout the state. We also see the lasting legacy of the early immigrants in the various Italian neighborhoods like Italian Village in Columbus and Little Italy in Cleveland. They should be celebrated for their commitment to community and their patriotism. They comprised 10% of the armed forces during World War II even though 600,000 had been labeled enemy aliens, while 2,000 were interned. In fact, Joe DiMaggio’s father was labeled an enemy alien and lost his livelihood, while Joe was

serving in the armed forces during the war. Another lesser-known fact was that one of the largest lynching attacks took place against Italians and Italian Americans in New Orleans in 1891 when nearly a dozen were killed by an angry mob after a murder trial led to an acquittal of Italian defendants. Despite these hardships, Italian Americans continued to thrive and became an important part of the fabric of America. They continue to do so today. They have inspired others who have come after them as role models of a strong work ethic, a commitment to family, and a strong sense of patriotism. Having a day dedicated to their stories, their success, their challenges will enrich us all.

As one of these Italian Americans who traces her roots back to Naples Italy, I respectfully request a yes vote on HB 449. Thank you.