

Suzanne Marshall
Ohio Senate Health Committee
March 10, 2021
Senate Bill 55 - Interested Party

Chairman Huffman, Vice Chair Antani, Ranking Member Antonio and members of the Senate Health Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on Senate Bill 55.

I live in Columbus, Ohio and I have been training to become a Guild Certified Feldenkrais Teacher® for the last five years. I ask that you amend SB 55 to add an exemption for people who practice movement education and adhere to the training, competency and ethical standards of their professional organization.

My training program is over 800 hours long and is accredited by the Feldenkrais Guild® of North America (FGNA). After graduating in May of this year, I'll be required to apply for certification, to adhere to FGNA's Standards of Practice and Code of Professional Conduct, and to fulfill continuing competency requirements and renew certification annually.

The Feldenkrais Method® is a valuable and life-changing modality for improving movement, function, and awareness for people of all ages and abilities. I am here to share with you how this method of somatic education has changed my life and why my right to practice the Feldenkrais Method is something worth protecting.

I am a survivor of sexual abuse, including childhood sexual abuse. As a survivor, I know what it feels like to be reduced to an object for someone else's gratification. I know what it feels like to be held captive, if only for a short period of time. I know what it feels like to have to pretend that everything is fine, while silently dying inside.

I would like to thank bill sponsors Senators Brennan, Fedor, Kunze and Yuko for their efforts to effectively end human trafficking in the state of Ohio. I greatly appreciate the work that you are doing to protect our human rights.

Human trafficking is not only sexual abuse, it is human slavery. Senate Bill 55 aims to fight human trafficking in Ohio by closing loopholes in our legislative system that allow massage to be practiced without oversight. It makes sense considering that "massage" services are being offered throughout our state as a front for the business of sexual slavery. It seems like a simple and straightforward solution... but let me tell you why it is not.

It is because of touch. Touch has the potential to be powerful. It can be harmful, when it is inappropriate or unwanted. It can be affirming, when it is safe and welcoming. It can be educational, when it guides one's attention to something outside of their awareness. It can be used or misused in so many different ways, because touch from one human to another is not merely a form of contact, it is a connection. The quality of that connection matters. The intention behind that connection matters. Touch is not merely applied, it is felt. As someone that has experienced sexual abuse, this matters deeply to me. A harmful touch is not always violent or aggressive. In my own experience, it can even be presented as "massage."

Touch can be difficult to define. It is physical, with attributes that are intangible. This is why it is so important that people who use touch in their work with the public be educated and held accountable to meet professional and ethical standards.

The issue with Senate Bill 55 when it comes to touch is that the proposed definition of massage could be interpreted to apply to the Feldenkrais Method of somatic education. But Feldenkrais is nothing like massage.

The Feldenkrais Method is about learning how to move from the inside out. In Feldenkrais® lessons, we use gentle, mindful movement to cultivate awareness. Feldenkrais teachers use verbal cues and/or touch to bring their client's attention to various aspects of their movement. The advantage of using touch in this work is that it provides feedback to a client's nervous system that they can feel. Touch in the Feldenkrais Method is a tool for cultivating awareness. We utilize touch for the purpose of education.

What are the practical applications of the Feldenkrais Method, and why does awareness matter? Why does movement education matter? It matters because it affects our quality of life and our freedom as human beings. Feldenkrais lessons can offer better mobility and function for people of all ages with neurological disorders, developmental delays, chronic pain, and injuries including brain damage. They can be an asset to performers, dancers, musicians, and athletes.

For survivors of sexual abuse, like myself, the Feldenkrais Method can be an invaluable tool for the journey back to wholeness. Sexual abuse has a way of creating separation between a person's thoughts, feelings, memories, and their sense of themselves. It changes the way we experience our bodies. Somatic education offers us a way back into our bodies by changing our habitual ways of moving and expanding our awareness to include parts of ourselves that have been cast off from the whole. I have experienced this kind of reintegration through the Feldenkrais Method as sensations of stability, of security, of aliveness, of power and as a sense of possibility and freedom for myself.

Without careful consideration, Senate Bill 55 could affect my right to practice the Feldenkrais Method® of somatic education in Ohio. It is important that we fight to end human trafficking, but it is also important that we do so in a way that does not restrict the freedom of survivors of sexual abuse—or any person, for that matter—to choose methods of education that suit them. I am asking that Senate Bill 55 be amended to include an exemption for people who practice somatic, or movement education, and adhere to the training, competency and ethical standards of their professional organization.

Thank you for hearing my testimony today.