

I am testifying in opposition to SB 16. I am a 75 year old white woman, retired nurse, parent and grandparent. My husband and I have been participating in and organizing demonstrations actively for the past five years. In all of these demonstrations—some as small as a handful of participants to thousands, I have never been threaten or witnessed any violent activity. What I have noticed in the past year is what seems to me as an increased tolerance of hostile behavior from observers, counter protestors, and government authorities. This escalating hostility is disproportionate to the facts. At the overwhelmingly peaceful demonstrations in support of the very serious grievances of Black Lives Matter, there has been escalating hostility towards demonstrators.

According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) 2020 report covering May through August, of the 7750 BLM demonstrations, 94% were peaceful. But there was a disproportionate use of force (9%) compared to all other demonstrations (3%). There has also been a significant increased use of less-than-lethal weapons in the past year: 65 events vs. 3 events. A hostile atmosphere is inflamed by escalating militarized responses, disproportionate media reporting on violence, disinformation campaigns, and infiltration of events by “agents provocateurs.” Activity of “non-state actors” such as car ramming, an increasingly armed presence and violent clashes with counter protestors has further increased tensions.

Ohio SB 16 poses an existential threat to Ohioans’ First Amendment rights. The bill is clearly aimed at intimidating citizens who wish to declare their opposition to an action that affects them or to declare their support of actions. It inhibits the citizens’ means of addressing their concerns to law makers which is a fundamental tool of participatory democracy.

The bill relies on eliciting an emotional reaction to poorly supported aims of protecting responders and property. It uses language that can be vaguely interpreted and selectively applied. If in the course of peacefully demonstrating in a crowd, I inadvertently step off the sidewalk – which has happened, I could be subject to a charges ranging from a misdemeanor to a felony. If I have organized an event as part of a Social Justice Act of Witness with my faith community, my faith community could be charged with a felony and a debilitating fine.

My faith calls me to support and promote certain principles including the worth of every person, justice, equity and compassion and the democratic process. My citizenship calls me to support the exercise of Constitutional rights including Free Speech. Senate Bill 16 allows neither. I respectfully request that this bill not receive Senate support.