

The Ohio State Senate
Senate Judiciary Committee
Proponent Testimony
Senate Bill 182

June 16, 2021

Dear Chairman Manning, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Shameka Parrish-Wright and I'm an Operations Manager at The Bail Project, a national nonprofit that provides free bail assistance for people who cannot afford it, while working to advance bail reform.

The issue of bail is close to my heart. Not only because I see this injustice firsthand *every single day* with the people that we help through The Bail Project, but because I have also suffered it personally. And it happened right here in Ohio.

I was born and raised in Cincinnati. When I was 18 years old, I was getting ready to start college, and I got engaged. That's young love for you...

One night, after we had hosted a birthday party for my brother, my then-fiance became aggressive. I was cleaning up while speaking with a lady who lived in the neighborhood. She had brought some cleaning supplies to help me and I offered her a drink to thank her. He did not like this. He smacked the drink out of my hand and began yelling at me.

So we had an argument. It was my home and I told him he had to leave. I began to pack his belongings and before I knew it, he was all over me, punching me and kicking me. I thought he was going to kill me. I tried to defend myself any way I could, grabbing onto objects as he threw me around and yelling for help. During the commotion, a neighbor called the police and they arrived shortly after.

When the police came, I told them everything that happened. I had never been arrested and I did not realize that I was signing my own warrant. I was handcuffed and taken to jail.

I spent two days in jail before ever seeing a judge. Little did I know my ordeal was just starting. My ex-fiance, on the other hand, who was charged with domestic violence, was able to quickly secure his release because he had the resources to do so. Even when he came to court to defend me and explain that

he had started the altercation, the judge did not care and set my bail at \$10K. I didn't have the money and neither did any of my loved ones.

I was charged with a felony and was told that I was facing prison if I went to trial and lost. I didn't know what to do. I had a young daughter at home and my college education ahead of me. I saw my life falling apart before my very eyes.

Like so many in that situation, I had to weigh my options. Do I plead guilty for a lesser offense and go home to my daughter and start college on time? Or do I hold on to my innocence and sit in jail until I can have a trial?

After spending 38 days in jail, I pled guilty to a lesser charge. All I wanted was to get out and see my daughter. I wanted to be home. I knew this plea would give me a criminal record that would follow me for the rest of my life, but at that moment I felt I had no other choice.

And that's the choice millions of people have to make in America *every single year* because of the cash bail system. If I had had money to pay my bail, I could have gone home and worked with a lawyer to fight my case. But because I was poor, I did not get my due process. The presumption of innocence only existed on paper.

It's been 25 years since that night when I thought my young life would come to a premature end. Today, I manage Bail Project teams in cities like Cincinnati to help people who cannot afford cash bail while working to end this unjust practice once and for all. In Cleveland and Cincinnati alone, we have helped more than 500 people. They have come back to 95 percent of their court dates even though they have no financial obligation to us or the court. Nationwide, we have helped over 16,000 individuals with similar results. This is good evidence that cash bail is not needed to make people come back to court.

Eliminating cash bail is not an issue of blue or red, Democrat or Republican. It's an issue of what is wrong and what is right. And putting a price tag on the presumption of innocence is simply wrong.

I am grateful to be here today with leaders who are committed to ending this injustice and helping envision a pretrial system that treats everyone fairly regardless of income or race.

I ask you to consider my testimony and vote yes on this critically important bill. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.