

Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 90

Chairman Manning, Vice Chair McColley, Ranking Member Thomas and members of the Senate Judiciary committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 90, legislation that seeks to expand the offense of domestic violence to also prohibit a person from knowingly impeding the normal breathing or circulation of the blood of a family or household member by applying pressure to the family or household member's throat or neck or blocking the family or household member's nose or mouth.

When I told friends, I was coming to Columbus today to once again share my testimony, I was asked why we need to keep fighting for this. You see, I have been a part of this fight for the last five years. When I first became involved in this only thirteen states had a strangulation statute. But I am confident that this year, Ohio will get it right. That Ohio will catch up to the forty-eight other states that have enhanced strangulation laws. First off, the lethality of strangulation and asphyxia has been plastered all over media forums due to the murder trial of Derek Chauvin. Secondly, as Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost said on Cleveland News 5, "he hopes Ohio lawmakers "finally" pass a bill to make strangulation a felony crime in the state this year. "I'm embarrassed by it," "The fact that we don't have this sends a message that we don't value women. That we don't want to protect against violence against women." He said. The fact that we do not already have this law coupled with the changes that are trying to be made with victims' compensation in Senate Bill 36 are currently sending that message loud and clear.

I have served Ohio in public safety for the last twenty years. I have spent the last seventeen years serving citizens as a paramedic. But I am not here to speak as a professional or an expert. I am here to speak as a forty-seven-year-old left permanently disabled by near fatal strangulation. This is me in the summer of 2006, if we are honest with each other, most people look at this and think, "that doesn't look that bad". But we now know the dangers of strangulation and that it often leaves no physical marks. This girl had no idea how close she was to dying that night. Never in a million years would I have thought that the trajectory of my life was being severely altered that night. Let me take you back for a moment. Many details of the night are still fuzzy to me, but a few memories are etched in my brain forever. Let me share one of my vivid memories of my life. A man I had

been dating and who repeatedly said I love you, sat across my hip bones with his knees firmly pressing on my forearms as he said to me “I don’t know if I should kiss you or kill you”. He then placed both of his hands on my neck and squeezed. I vividly remember thinking that I was going to die. Memories of my child flashed through my head as I wondered who would raise him? Who would care for him? But by the grace of God, and what some of the best doctors in the country are calling a miracle, I am still here.

I have no expert testimony to offer you about the legalities or medical aspects of strangulation, there are plenty of others giving you that. What I do have to offer is a testimony of someone who has had their life severely impacted by the lack of medical knowledge and supporting laws regarding domestic violence and strangulation. After nearly losing my life in 2006, I began a downward spiral into a medical mess that would last the next fourteen years. In those thirteen years, I have inaccurately been diagnosed with multiple medical problems. At one point, I was on fourteen different medications and doctors still could not figure out what was wrong or control my symptoms. In early 2019, due to all over these medical problems, I was told I would mostly likely never work, drive, or have a normal functioning life again. I was devastated and contemplated suicide.

You see, in early 2017, I had gone to my primary care doctor and told her, “I must be having a midlife crisis, or I am going crazy. Something is wrong with me, and I cannot take it anymore. I cannot handle sounds or lights and I feel like I have no control over my body or emotions”. She ordered an MRI and that was the first time that the diagnosis of brain injury entered my life. It was from there that I was sent to neuro specialists. For the couple of years, neurologist after neurologist poked, probed, and tested me over and over. They believed that my brain injury could not be impacting me that greatly over a decade later.

In June of 2019, I traveled to Minneapolis, Minnesota where I underwent two weeks of evaluations and treatments. It was there that I felt like I may have a chance at a productive life again. I came back a “different person” as many people have told me. I have been out there two times since that first treatment.

It was two years ago this month, all my doctors finally came to the same conclusion, I have a traumatic brain injury from that 2006 event that has been the root of all my medical mess. As I write this, I am now

medicine free and all my previous medical diagnosis have been removed except one. I have traumatic brain injury secondary to hypoxia resulting from near fatal strangulation. I am still working on rebuilding neuro pathways, and I spend two hours each day working my brain so I can appear as I do to people today, "just fine".

Over the last several years of this excruciating journey, I have often wished he had just shot me that night when he had that gun held to my head. The charges would have been clear, and his prosecution would have mostly likely been fair and just. Instead of him receiving a fine and probation. Doctors would have easily seen my injuries and been able to quickly treat them accordingly. Instead, I have had over \$310,000 in medical expenses for inaccurate diagnoses. But that is not what happened to me. He used the silent weapon called strangulation that leaves invisible injuries and often leaves the victims with life sentences.

I do not completely know or understand what it takes to make a law. I know you will hear and read several testimonies. I know that when it comes to opponent testimony someone will say as they have before, that my testimony while sad, does not support why strangulation should be a felony. My response to that is this, there is no way for persons hands to accidentally find their way around a person's neck. There is no way for a person to accidentally wrap an object around a person's neck. That act has intent. As many experts say, that act is the final warning shot before murder. My abuser was charged with felonious assault as I have heard opponent testimony say should be done. Let us go back to my picture again. Serious physical harm.... If you were on a jury, would you look at this picture and truly consider this serious physical harm worthy of felony charges? Here is something else to consider. I was one of the lucky ones that night. I was one of the only fifteen percent that had injuries bad enough to been seen on photographs. I had every advantage that night and it still went horribly wrong.

My abuser, as with so many of the other stranglers, escalated his crimes. Ten years later an innocent family who was at a campground trying to enjoy time together had their lives also changed forever. My abuser stepped in front of a vehicle driven by a sixteen-year-old girl. She was pulled from the car, had a gun pointed and her, and he threatened to blow her head off. Those people, along with so many others, including all those in Dayton on August 4th, 2019, had no idea the dangers of those men

mingling around them. This is not a law that just punishes one person for a crime committed to another person. This is a law that would help protect the citizens of Ohio from the most dangerous people in society. The people who do an act that silently screams to the public, I am a future murderer.

In conclusion, anyone who can stand before you and tell you that strangulation should not be a felony has clearly never encountered the act. As a paramedic/firefighter, I have always feared the thought of drowning in a water rescue or dying in a fire. I imagine that it would feel very much like the way I felt that night. Begging God to not let me die this way. Worrying about my child and who would care for him. Having moments of my life flash before my eyes. Fighting to breath and to stay alive only to feel the life slowly leaving your body. That person has clearly never had their life and whether they live or die in the next few moments held in the hands of another human being.... Literally.

Thank you,

Paula Walters