



**Proponent Testimony submitted to the
Ohio Senate Judiciary Committee
House Bill 427
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Chair Manning, Vice Chair McColley, Ranking Member Thomas and members of the Ohio Senate Judiciary Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony regarding House Bill 427, which would create an expanded definition of “compel” in both O.R.C. 2907.21 and 2905.32. In doing so, this bill allows prosecutors to consider additional factors when pursuing legal action against traffickers who use substances and substance use disorders as tools to facilitate human trafficking.

As Ohio’s federally-designated statewide sexual violence coalition, the Ohio Alliance to End Sexual Violence (OAESV) advocates for comprehensive responses and rape crisis services for survivors and empowers communities to prevent sexual violence. OAESV works with survivors, rape crisis centers, other statewide coalitions, and national partners to understand, respond to, and prevent human trafficking. Through this work, we know that traffickers are skilled manipulators who strategically target vulnerable individuals, and trafficking victimization imposes significant and often life-long barriers on survivors.

Ohio is one of the top ten states in the nation for *reported* trafficking cases.¹ Data from 2020 shows that Ohio law enforcement reported 216 human trafficking investigations. The majority of the victims in these investigations identified drugs, alcohol or other dependencies as contributing factors to being trafficked.² The opioid epidemic ravaging our state and the low incidence reporting for human trafficking crimes both suggest that the problem of coercive substance use may be significantly more widespread than current data suggests. Despite this phenomenon, obstacles persist for prosecutors to hold traffickers accountable for coercive tactics under current Ohio law.

A pervasive myth about human trafficking is that it more often than not involves kidnapping or another method of physically forcing someone into a trafficking situation. In reality, traffickers frequently use psychological, emotional, and verbal forms of abuse to trick, defraud, manipulate, coerce, and threaten victims. A common tool to facilitate trafficking is the use of drugs or other substances, which can be used to subdue or compel victims to comply.³ By creating or enabling a dependency on substances, the trafficker further solidifies their power over the victim, keeping them engaged in trafficking and dependent on the trafficker. This abuse can be cyclical; the trafficker may identify a person with a substance abuse issue and aggravate their substance use disorder to make

¹ Human Trafficking Hotline. (2020). National Human Trafficking Hotline Data Report. <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/sites/default/files/National%20Report%20For%202020.pdf>

² Office of the Attorney General. (2020). Annual Report: 2020 Human Trafficking. <https://www.ohioattorneygeneral.gov/Files/Reports/Human-Trafficking-Commission-Annual-Reports/2020-Human-Trafficking-Annual-Report>

³ Fechs, K., Currier, A. (2019). 2018 Federal Human Trafficking Report. The Human Trafficking Institute. <https://www.traffickinginstitute.org/federal-human-trafficking-report-2018/>

them reliant – the trafficker can then exploit fears and/or withdrawal symptoms by coercing them to meet demands or to engage in commercial sex.

The opioid epidemic has provided increased opportunities for traffickers to exploit and abuse vulnerable people in Ohio, particularly those who have been isolated or negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. We must close this dangerous loophole that allows traffickers to weaponize substances, particularly opioids, with impunity. Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 427. I am available to answer any questions you have or provide any additional information via email egemar@oaesv.org.