

Chair Hoagland, Vice Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Thomas, Committee Members. I am the Rev. Joan VanBecelaere, a retired Unitarian Universalist Minister in Columbus, Ohio, and former Director of Unitarian Universalist Justice Ohio.

I appreciate the opportunity to offer my opposition testimony on SB 185 regarding a political subdivision's emergency powers when suppressing a riot, mob, or potential riot or mob and the prevention of confiscation of firearms and weapons during an emergency by authorities.

Over the years, I have been able to participate in a number of public prayer and public witness events safely and peacefully at the Ohio Statehouse and other public venues. I have been able to engage in these 'protests' or witness events knowing that it is my First Amendment right to do so, as long as other persons and property are not harmed.

SB 185 will, as I read it, prohibit any governmental authority in Ohio from preventing the sale or confiscation of firearms, ammunition, or other deadly weapons under any lawful circumstances. Those prohibitions include any disaster, war, act of terrorism, civil disorder, public health crisis or any other kind of emergency. It also allows those engaging in public witness to be cordoned off into a particular area.

But I fear that SB 185, if passed, will have a stifling and fear-filled chilling effect on peaceful public witness events by creating an unsafe space for those choosing to exercise their right to assemble, petition the government and speak public truth.

When I have engaged in public witness with other organizations, like the Ohio Council of Churches and Faith in Public Life and the League of Women Voters and others, no one has been carrying firearms or any kind of weapon. And we usually post clergy Peacekeepers on the perimeter of the event to maintain order. None of the events I have participated in have been cordoned off by police, but I don't doubt that would be a possibility.

I have also seen in the media other kinds of protests where people are heavily armed and frankly, quite intimidating and frightening.

If SB 185 passes, I can easily envision a cordoned off group of peaceful protestors surrounded by heavily armed counter demonstrators from who

the police cannot legally remove weapons. Given the “stand your ground” law in Ohio, I can see this as a recipe for a bloodbath like the one in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

This legislation, if enacted, would make us all less safe by removing the safety guardrails put into place by law. It would ‘chill’ and stifle participation in peaceful First Amendment activities of public witness.

Local law enforcement with their hands tied would be required to stand by while armed counter protestors and provocateurs surround and intimidate the peaceful group. If government officials choose to act, based on their best judgment for the sake of safety, those officials could be sued for damages. The motto “To Serve and Protect” would be meaningless under these circumstances and the safety of all; protestors, law enforcement, counter protestors, and provocateurs; would be threatened.

With protestors, counter protestors, provocateurs, firearms, ammunition, ammunition-reloading equipment or deadly weapons, all in the same space poses a dangerous, unsafe and volatile situation. If there is anything that resembles an attack or over-reaction by the protestors against those with weapons and those with weapons choose to use them, serious harm or death could occur.

Please do not vote this bill into law. SB 185 is not going to make Ohioans safer. Nor will it serve to bring greater justice or expand democracy in our state. Instead, it will make us all unsafe and threatens our First Amendment rights of peaceful public witness. Please stop SB 185.