

Proponent Testimony of Kathleen Wiant on SB 126
Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee
March 31, 2021

Chairman Johnson, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Williams, and members of the Senate Workforce & Higher Education Committee, thank you for allowing me to offer testimony in support of Senate Bill 126, Collins Law: Ohio's Anti-hazing Law, named in honor of my son, Collin Wiant.

My name is Kathleen Wiant and I'm a mother of 5 from Columbus, Ohio. 2 ½ years ago my family was awoken in the middle of the night to find 2 police officers and a chaplain who were there to tell us that our beautiful 18-year-old son, Collin, was found dead at 45 Mill Street in Athens, Ohio. We knew the address immediately. We knew it was the address of Collin's fraternity house. That's all we knew.

In the months to follow we began to learn more about the details that led to Collin's death, and we learned that for the last weeks of Collin's life, Collin had endured extreme, tortuous hazing. He was beaten, he was belted, he was waterboarded, and he was forced drugs and alcohol. Since that most horrific night, our family, both individually and collectively, has experienced the most painful type of heartbreak imaginable, because of hazing.

We don't want another family to go through the pain and loss our family has experienced. Sadly, another family has. The hazing death of Stone Foltz further underscores the importance of getting this bill passed and not have it stall as it did last November. No family should ever have to go through what his family has gone through. No family should ever have to go through what our family has gone through.

That is why since Collin's tragic death 2 ½ years ago, we have devoted ourselves to working closely with Senator Stephanie Kunze and now Senator Theresa Gavarone, along with a group of stakeholders including prosecutors, police, universities, the North American Interfraternity Council representing 58 national fraternities, and the National Panhellenic Conference representing 26 national sororities. In collaboration with them we have created legislation that has the potential to make Ohio a national leader in anti-hazing reform.

This bill is about changing a culture where hazing is accepted, and even expected. This bill is about saving lives. We have a culture that dismisses hazing with a "boys will be boys" mentality. When deplorable, reprehensible acts like beatings and waterboarding, are dressed up with words like tradition, ritual, brotherhood, or rite of passage, we then, call it hazing. We need to call it what it really is. It's abuse... and it's barbaric.

Each year, 1 ½ million high school students are hazed. At the collegiate level, 55% of students in clubs, teams and organizations are hazed and don't report it, because hazing is only reported 5% of the time.

We don't realize how widespread hazing is because the only time we hear about hazing is when there's a death and it makes the news. But what about all the hazing that doesn't make the headlines? The kids who are traumatized from hazing. Or hospitalized? The kids who become depressed or suicidal because of hazing? The kids who suffer PTSD? The kids who will never be the same person again because of hazing?

Parents and students deserve and need access to the necessary information to keep students safe from hazing. This act will provide parents and students with transparency into the behaviors of organizations sanctioned for hazing. Universities will now have a website where parents and students can access this information so they can make educated, informed decisions about what organizations to join, or not. Had this been in effect when Collin was pledging a fraternity, we would have been able to see that his fraternity had previously sent a pledge to the emergency room with his head gashed open requiring 8 staples, as a result of a pledging activity. **Show pic of head staples**

Had this law been in effect when Collin was pledging his fraternity, we also would have learned that his fraternity was placed on suspension just years prior for hazing pledges, in the middle of a winter's night, in their front yard, striped down and blindfolded. Armed with this information, Collin would NOT have pledged that fraternity. Armed with this information, Collin would be alive today.

Collin's law will also increase criminal penalties and strengthen anti-hazing policies on campuses throughout Ohio and provide for real enforcement mechanisms that deter hazing. It will systematically lead to the education and training about hazing for any student-facing employee at universities and colleges throughout Ohio.

I hope you agree that we MUST expect greater responsibility on our campuses to keep our students safe when parents entrust schools with their children for 4 years – That's where we need individuals in positions of authority to do their part to put an end to it.

The Ohio Senate can now do its part to put an end to hazing. Collin's Law is supported by over 20,000 students from Bowling Green State University and over 5,000 students from the University of Dayton who have voiced their opinion in support of Collin's Law. Students across the state of Ohio are sick of hazing. They've had their fill of it and they're not sitting by and letting it happen anymore. They are the generation who is standing up and saying "No more hazing!" Now, they need their government leaders to do the same.

That's why I stand before you in support of Collin's Law: Ohio's Anti-hazing Law. It is my sincere hope that this Committee will consider these recommendation as it deliberates, and that you will pass this life-saving legislation before students head to campus in the Fall.

We missed an opportunity in November to pass Collin's Law in Ohio. Had it passed, who knows how things could have been different. Let's not miss another opportunity. Let's not have another tragic, unnecessary loss of a beautiful, young life. NOW is the time to pass Collin's Law.

Last Saturday would have been Collin's 21st birthday. Our family now spends that day doing Random Acts of Kindness in honor of the person Collin was. We're so thankful to be together as a family to honor him, but a minute doesn't go by that we don't think of the joyful birthday celebration we should be having for Collin, WITH COLLIN, the celebration we would be having, if not for hazing. We need to change the culture of hazing. Changing this culture begins with changing the laws. Because no family should have to experience the most painful type of heartbreak imaginable due of hazing.

Thank you for allowing me to appear before this Committee.