

76th House District

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Sponsor Testimony: House Bill 214

Chairman Burke, Vice Chair Beagle, Ranking Member Tavares and members of the Senate Health, Human Services and Medicaid committee, thank you for allowing Representative Merrin and I to offer sponsor testimony on HB 214. The Down Syndrome Non-Discrimination Act is priority legislation for Ohio Right to Life and aims to prohibit abortions from taking place based on a potential Down syndrome diagnosis. I introduced similar legislation last General Assembly, but believe the language included in this bill to be even stronger and want to thank my joint sponsor for encouraging the changes included - which I will let him address during his testimony.

I am well aware that this committee has previously listened to emotional testimony about abortion, and the rights of the unborn. I am also aware that this is a topic none of us takes lightly, and that all of us have our minds made up on. I am not standing before you today to try to change your feelings on abortion, but instead to bring attention to what I believe to be one of the worst types of discrimination possible.

Upon receiving a potential diagnosis of Down syndrome for their unborn child, nearly 90% of women choose abortion. Substitute House Bill 552 from the 130th General Assembly sought to address this alarming statistic. The Down Syndrome Information Act requires medical professionals to distribute up-to-date, evidence-based information on Down syndrome to parents who receive the diagnosis, either prenatally or after birth.

You are all aware I recently had my first child. In interest of full disclosure, I chose not to take the test that would have identified a potential Down syndrome diagnosis prenatally. Although I was fully informed about what a Down syndrome diagnosis could mean for my family, worst case scenarios of course had to be expressed, and I was continuously encouraged to reconsider taking the test. Often times this left me feeling confused and overwhelmed about what a diagnosis like Down syndrome really would mean for my son.

You see, these are not the stories of rape and unplanned pregnancies often used to explain away the practice of killing our unborn, but instead are often stories of families intent on growing, only to tragically choose otherwise when faced with this potential diagnosis. I am absolutely not here to judge these almost-parents. I can only imagine how scary and overwhelming a diagnosis like Down syndrome would be. Not everyone is fit to parent a child with Down syndrome; I will be the first person to admit that. However, there are many options out there for parents that find themselves in

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this situation. Choosing to end a person's life simply because of this potential diagnosis is discrimination. Period.

Down syndrome is a genetic condition caused by the presence of all or a partial extra copy of chromosome 21. Common traits a person with Down syndrome exhibit include low muscle tone, a small stature, an upward slant to their eyes, a single deep crease across the center of their palm and some degree of intellectual disability. A person with Down syndrome is at increased risk for several medical conditions including congenital heart defects, respiratory, hearing and vision problems, thyroid conditions and gastrointestinal issues. **All of these conditions are treatable and/or manageable with modern healthcare and the majority of individuals with Down syndrome are now able to lead healthy, long lives.**

One in every 691 babies is diagnosed with Down syndrome making it the most common genetic condition. 400,000 Americans are currently living with Down syndrome and, on average, 6,000 babies with Down syndrome are born each year. The life expectancy of a person diagnosed with Down syndrome has increased dramatically over the last several decades – from just 25 in 1983 to 60+ today. While all individuals diagnosed with Down syndrome will experience cognitive delays, these delays are more often than not only mild to moderate.

Over 2,000 parents and guardians of people with Down syndrome were surveyed – 79% reported that their outlook on life was more positive because of their child with Down syndrome. Among siblings (12 and older), 97% expressed feelings of pride about their sibling with Down syndrome and 88% thought they were better people because of their experience. Individuals with Down syndrome were also surveyed. 99% are happy with their lives. 97% like who they are and 96% like how they look.

Again, I am aware that even with all health and educational advances surrounding Down syndrome, that not all individuals are equipped to parent a child with this diagnosis. Again, there are many organizations that exist – ranging from support to placement – that are able to help.

Regardless of which corner of the state you live, there is an organization dedicated to improving the lives of people with Down syndrome and their families. In Northeast Ohio, The Up Side of Downs provides support, education and advocacy. In Central Ohio, The Down Syndrome Association of Central Ohio serves 18 counties and promotes community involvement, and in Southwest Ohio the Downs Syndrome Association of Greater Cincinnati empowers individuals, educates families, enhances communities and celebrates the lives of people with Down syndrome.

The National Down Syndrome Adoption Network (NDSAN) – provides information to families who may be seeking alternatives to parenting. They have a registry of adoptive families across the United States looking to adopt children with Down syndrome. There are no fees. The organization also provides support to the adoptive families.

A diagnosis of Down syndrome for your unborn child can be devastating and life changing. Not everyone is equipped to handle this lifelong commitment, but thankfully, as you can see, there are now many options available to families. I believe that life begins at conception and that abortion should never be considered an option. However, regardless of if you agree with me or not, I hope that you can see that this is not an issue about abortion – it is an issue of discrimination. Discriminating against a person, not allowing them their God-given right to life, simply because they MIGHT have Down syndrome.

Chairman Burke, Vice Chair Beagle, Ranking Member Tavares and members of the Senate Health, Human Services and Medicaid committee, thank you again for the opportunity to testify on HB 214. I will now turn it over to my joint sponsor, Representative Merrin.