June 13th, 2017

Chairman Bacon, Vice Chair Dolan, and the Honorable Members of the Ohio Senate Judiciary Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today. My name is Wendy Tarr. I am the director of the Vincentian Ohio Action Network, which was formed by the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Diocesan Council of Columbus (SVDP). The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is a Catholic lay organization that enables its members to live out the values of their faith and grow spiritually through person-to-person service to the needy and the suffering. Our Columbus SVdP has over 3,000 volunteers based in Catholic Churches in our region running food pantries, clothing centers, homeless shelters and community services.

I have been working with the currently incarcerated and those returning from incarceration in Central Ohio since 2014. I work with a range of individuals, community groups, faith-based organizations and reentry professionals to improve reentry and create more safety and justice in our community. I am here to speak in opposition SB67. I have also attached a letter that highlights a series of additional concerns with expanding public registries that raise additional points beyond my personal testimony here and has been signed by two dozen leaders in Ohio. We need this committee to take into consideration the range of unintended consequences that could come from a bill like this one.

I would like to share a testimony from a woman that I know through my work in reentry. She wanted her story to be used to oppose this legislation, but wished to keep her name anonymous:

“I was a victim of domestic violence that lasted many years. I was held hostage in my house and lived through beatings that caused lasting damage to my body. My abuser threated to kill me and my family and I believed he would do it. I was in fear for my life. I killed my abuser in self-defense but wasn’t able to prove it in court. Ultimately, I was convicted of murder. After 18 months in prison on the murder conviction, I won my appeal and I received a second trial. Dr. Lenora Walker stood witness for my second trial. As one of the leading experts in her field, she conducted research and coined the term “battered woman’s syndrome.” I was the first victim in Franklin County to use battered women’s syndrome in my defense. Dr. Walker spent two days evaluating me and testified on my behalf for eight hours. My conviction was overturned and the new verdict was voluntary manslaughter. I spent twelve years in prison.

I’ve been out for twelve years now, and I’ve had nothing but a traffic ticket. I own my own business and I’m considered an upstanding citizen by all the people I know. I am trusted in my community and accepted into people’s home with the work that I do. Had I been on this registry, I don’t think I would have easily gotten a job at my release. If I was on a registry, I’d fear that anytime there was an unsolved violent crime the police would harass me. Just imagine how everyone looks up the sex offenders, and then they would find me on that list as a violent offender. It would just be horrible.

When I was arrested the Franklin County Sheriff at the jail got an anonymous call that if they let me out, I would be dead. My parents received death threats on their phone as well from individuals connected to the man I killed and they documented these calls. When I was in prison, I was placed in protective custody for my own protection. This meant I was in solitary confinement for two years and only allowed out for an hour each day. This was because relatives of the person I killed violated parole and were threatening my life. If this registry had been in effect when I was first home, I’m not sure I would have been kept safe. There are so many battered women in similar straights when they get out, especially if they killed their batterer. They are not safe when they first come home. Making their address public to the community threatens their safety and also would cause ongoing distress to many women who need housing and need to feel safe in their own home. This bill does not consider how it would impact people like me and the women I know still in prison who need to be assured safety and support at their release, not to be forced to have their conviction and face printed and handed to all their neighbors.”

While I understand that the bill is born out of a desire to form a safer society, it carries unintended consequences that could have life or death implications for restored citizens and people who have also been victims of crimes, such as this woman. It may be easy to dismiss a personal testimony as an isolated event or an exception to the norm, but this woman wanted me to emphasize that she knows many others who find themselves in similar situations, threatened by the friends or families of their abusers. There are support groups inside the prison for such women. The privacy and safety of these restored citizens are at stake and the passage of this bill will put some of Ohio’s most vulnerable at risk.

The public does not fully understand our criminal justice system. Sending a card with a photo and one’s conviction does not provide helpful or adequate information to the public. It also does nothing to stop crime or help a person with a violent history get help. People can go to prison for crimes they are an accessory to, even when they have not personally committed a violent act. This bill seeks to include those individuals.

I know a mother who struggled with addiction and hung around with the wrong people at one point in her life. She went to prison for armed robbery. She was not at the scene of this crime but she knew information about the situation and was sentenced nonetheless. If I got a card telling me the mom living next to me was a violent armed burglar this would deeply color my feelings about her. I would likely limit my children’s interaction with hers. The truth is, the women I know is not violent. She’s a great mom, maintaining her recovery, and working to help improve the community. It would be unfair to defame her character based on her conviction, which does not reflect who she is or her threat to myself or my children.

If we want to form a safer society for everyone, we must consider the insight that these stories offer. This is not a harmless bill. It will impact the community in ways that are damaging and have real life implications. There is also no evidence to suggest a registry does anything to advance public safety. In fact, it is likely to result in the opposite for many restored citizens. If we consider the impact of the sex offender registry, we know that expanding this method would create more homelessness, instability, and stress which do not lead to positive reintegration.

This committee needs to deliberate and consider these issues and also ensure policy is evidence-based, carefully constructed with full details, and not reactionary. This bill is none of these things. Please oppose SB 67.

Thank you,

Wendy Tarr

Director

Vincentian Ohio Action Network

St. Vincent de Paul, Diocesan Council of Columbus