Senate Judiciary Committee

Senate Bill 66

Proponent testimony of: Rabbi Rick Kellner

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February 20, 2018

Good morning Chairman Bacon, Vice Chairman Dolan, Ranking Member Thomas and members of the Senate Judiciary committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 66. My name is Rick Kellner and I serve as the faith leader of Congregation Beth Tikvah in Worthington, Ohio, but I am also here today representing the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism in Ohio. Our clergy serve more than 43,000 Jews in 34 synagogues in every corner of Ohio. We are a faith-based group, organizing our communities around issues of Jewish values. In October, 70 Reform Jews, including 22 rabbis visited the statehouse to lobby in support of Senate Bill 66.

In our Jewish text and tradition, one of the highest values is something called *Teshuva*. This Hebrew word can be translated as repentance or return- return to God and return to better versions of ourselves. In Judaism the holiest days of the year are our New Year and our Day of Atonement, which happen just ten days apart. This past fall on the Jewish New Year, I stood before my congregation and spoke about Senate Bill 66. Part of the message of the Jewish New Year is that the world can only continue to work if we combine judgement with mercy. We have a role in making the world stand by helping to create a balance of mercy and judgment. One of the great sages of the Talmud, our central book of law which is quoted right outside this building on our State Holocaust Memorial, taught, “Great is repentance for it transforms one’s sins into merits.” We generally think of repentance as a way of achieving expiation for the wrongs we have done. However, the Talmud invites us to think about repentance in a new way. It is not about changing the past, but about defining a new direction for the future. We evolve morally, becoming the kind of people who no longer fall back into the patterns of misconduct that defined our past. This is not just a matter of values but also important to the lives of the people I serve. My congregation’s past president has a daughter who was incarcerated for a felony drug crime. I have seen and heard as their family walked the hard road of trying to find housing, work and a restored life for their daughter after serving time in prison. Being able to expunge her record not only helped restore her life, but helped bring some level of wholeness back to an entire family.

Right now, our criminal record expungement laws are too narrow. There is little room for *teshuva* or repentance in our law. People must be given the opportunity to work toward the transformation of their sins into merits. Along with many of my rabbinic colleagues, we have spoken with rabbis, Judges, elected officials and restored citizens throughout Ohio. We have learned that many judges want to offer people the opportunity for redemption but their hands are tied. We have heard stories about the doors slammed in the faces and opportunities closed to those carrying around criminal records that they have already served time for and who have done the hard work of repentance. Senate Bill 66 would restore the opportunity for people to get their lives back. This is especially relevant for the addiction epidemic in our state. Addiction is in illness that leads to frequent violations- clergy like myself witness this first hand. This legislation will make access to loans, jobs, housing and education attainable once again. People will be less likely to return to the cycle of addiction, crime and incarceration and will be more likely to remain in communities successfully. Including rehabilitation as a purpose of felony sentencing is vital to giving Ohio healthy communities and to respecting the sanctity of human life.

On October 25th, 70 Jews from across Ohio held 29 legislative visits with our representatives. We felt the urgency then and we feel it even more today, as we have been and will continue to watch the bill’s progress. I respectfully urge you to bring Senate Bill 66 to a vote so this important legislation can give people the chance to transform sins into merits.

Thank you again for allowing me to testify this morning. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.