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Senate Bill 196 - Proponent Testimony
Ohio Senate Judiciary Committee
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Thank you, Chair Eklund, Vice-Chair Manning, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the Ohio Senate Judiciary Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer proponent testimony on Senate Bill 196, regarding "Advocate Privilege". I have been a volunteer with the Rape Crisis Center of Medina and Summit Counties, working in the courts since 2008. Over the past several years, I have traveled to Columbus with the Ohio Alliance to End Sexual Violence on "Advocacy Day" to speak with legislators about changing laws to allow for advocate privilege. The experience of meeting with those who shape our laws has been educational and beneficial for me. I feel that by working with our state leaders, we are making a difference in helping the survivors we serve.

As a volunteer advocate, I have worked with numerous survivors of sexual violence who are going through the justice system process. The survivors and co-survivors I meet are often traumatized by the crimes that have been committed against them or their loved ones. No matter how long it has been since their assaults, whether days or decades, their lives have been impacted forever by the perpetrators' actions. They are in urgent need of a trusted person who will keep their innermost feelings in confidence. Unless they feel safe in doing so, they will not disclose their deepest concerns. Most survivors suffer a loss of trust in others. By allowing them to share their questions or fears with a trusted advocate, we are better able to provide the services and community resources that may help them heal physically and emotionally. As community-based rape crisis center advocates, we are obligated to maintain strict confidentiality when working with our clients. In my work, survivors' privacy is always a top priority.

This legislation would provide the same level of privilege that a defendant has with their attorney. Survivors deserve this right as much or more as criminal defendants. Currently, privilege is extended to counselors or clergy, but not specifically to advocates working in Ohio rape crisis programs. Survivors may not have a connection with a church or cannot afford counseling, but they may reach out for the free confidential advocacy services provided by their local rape crisis centers. Because our advocates have specific training to assist those affected by sexual violence, we are able to offer the type of services and emotional support these survivors desperately need. By changing the law to include advocate privilege, we can reassure them that their disclosures will be protected.

Without a clear definition in the law, we cannot guarantee that we can protect the information that survivors share with us. Ohio is currently one of only 14 states that does not offer rape crisis advocates privilege in their communications with clients. Now is the time for Ohio to support survivors of these heinous and life-altering crimes by passing Senate Bill 196. Thank you for your help!