

Proponent Testimony on House Bill 41
Civil Justice Committee
Meredith M. Veltri, Ph.D., ABPP
Director of Forensic and Specialized Services, Netcare Access
February 23, 2021

Greetings, Chairman Hillyer, Vice Chair Grendell, Ranking Member Galonski, and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss House Bill 41, and thank you to Representatives Lanese and Liston for their dedication to protecting their constituents.

My name is Dr. Meredith Veltri, and I am the Director of Forensic and Specialized Assessment Services for Netcare Access. I am board certified in forensic psychology by the American Board of Professional Psychology. I conduct forensic psychological evaluations and provide expert opinions to courts in Ohio. I am also a former law enforcement officer of the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Over the course of my career thus far, I have evaluated many violent individuals and have been threatened by them or their family members. Therefore, I take steps to maximize my safety and that of my family.

Due to my line of work, I routinely search for my information online so that I can monitor what is available, and take steps to keep that information out of the reach of people who may wish me harm. I easily accomplished this when I lived in other states - and I have lived in six other states. However, in Ohio, I learned that my voter registration information, including my home address, is a matter of public record. I contacted the Secretary of State's office, and I was informed that this was written into statute. I was told that if I wanted to change whether people could find me at home, I would have to change the law. This is why we are here today.

The Ohio Revised Code designates individuals who can petition to have their residential information removed from public records. These individuals include "a peace officer, parole officer, probation officer, bailiff, prosecuting attorney, assistant prosecuting attorney, correctional employee, or federal law enforcement officer," among others. Forensic evaluators, probate pre-screeners, and employees of the state's psychiatric hospitals are notably absent from this list. This omission does not make sense, given that we work with the exact same population as the individuals named- that is, individuals involved with the courts. House Bill 41 would allow these professionals to request that public offices remove or redact our home addresses, and those of our family members. That's all.

It is not difficult to find personal information about nearly anyone online. There are numerous web sites that readily provide home addresses. Although many of these sites provide some confusing route for having one's information removed, in Ohio, the information is automatically re-populated since those sites draw their information from public records. As such, there is presently no measure that would prevent a vindictive defendant from easily locating me or my family.

Forensic psychologists offer expert opinions that have significant implications for the disposition of criminal cases, and defendants are sometimes displeased with the opinions that we offer to the courts. Whereas we understand that we are providing an important service for the judicial system, defendants often perceive that we are simply acting against them. Some respond by threatening us and our families.

I conducted a forensic psychological evaluation of an individual with multiple felony charges in Ohio. When the police conducted a search of the defendant's vehicle, they located voter registration information for several people. The defendant had printed the home addresses for numerous individuals involved in his case. He used that information to threaten an officer and his family members, slash the tires and break the windows of vehicles belonging to court officials, and set a fire on a judge's property. Judges were just recently granted public records redaction, and the law does not presently provide protection for family members of these individuals. This bill would close that gap and better protect those who serve the legal system, as well as their families.

I understand the importance of being accessible and transparent about my work within the confines of the law, and with regard to ethical and professional guidelines. However, this can be accomplished without compromising my safety, or that of my family. We fully accept our need to be responsible and take reasonable steps to safeguard our personal information, including our digital footprints on social media. What we need your help with is keeping our residential information private. If someone has questions about the work that I do, they are welcome to contact me at my place of business. However, placing the precise location of my family into the hands of individuals who may wish them harm simply makes no sense to me and is unacceptable. This legislation bears no expense, and provides a measure of common sense protection by closing a dangerous loophole in the law. As such, I ask that you vote yes on House Bill 41, and provide us the same protections offered to others who work with the same population.

You are welcome to contact me if I can answer any questions for you. Thank you for your time.