

House Criminal Justice Committee
Mike Rodgers – Director of Policy and Legislation, Proponent Testimony
Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost
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Chairman LaRe, Vice Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Leland, and members of the Criminal Justice Committee—thank you for allowing me to provide proponent testimony today on HB 504, the Sacred Spaces Act.

Last January, a group of protestors entered St. Joseph Cathedral in downtown Columbus, Ohio carrying signs and loudly chanting. The chaotic scene that unfolded included a protestor rushing toward the pulpit and protestors resisting removal by law enforcement. The service was ultimately halted and unable to resume until all protestors were removed from the premises.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, our office became aware of multiple Jewish services being conducted remotely that were also interrupted. I believe the committee will receive testimony today regarding specific examples of those disruptions, sometimes referred to as “Zoom bombings.”

HB 504 seeks to address these types of unlawful disruptions in a targeted and thoughtful way. In existing law, Section 2917.12 of the Revised Code already states that disruption of a lawful meeting is punishable as a misdemeanor of the fourth degree. HB 504 builds upon this existing section of Ohio law, and adds an enhancement if the meeting that is disrupted is an assemblage of people met for religious worship.

Under the bill, if a person intends to disturb or disquiet an assemblage of people met for religious worship within the place of worship or otherwise on the property—and they do in fact disturb the order and solemnity of the assemblage—disrupting this lawful meeting becomes a misdemeanor of the first degree. The bill provides the same penalty for an individual who intends to disrupt or interfere with a virtual meeting or gathering of people for religious worship using a computer, computer system, telecommunications device, or other electronic device.

Protecting the ability of our citizens to freely worship, regardless of their political creed or affiliation, is a foundational principle of our republic. The ability for citizens to freely express themselves is a paramount concern, too. Both of these principles were top of mind in the drafting of this bill. That is why this bill does nothing to limit the right of protestors to peaceably assemble outside on public property adjacent to a place of worship, or to protest on any of the myriad of other electronically available forums.

I want to thank Representative Johnson and former Representative Rick Carfagna for their leadership on this bill, and I would be happy to answer any questions at this time.