

Proponent testimony of Cynthia Brown, Founder and CEO, Heartbeat Movement Inc.

Chairman Manning, Vice Chair Reynolds, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and esteemed members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, I stand before you today as the founder and CEO of Heartbeat Movement Inc. But more importantly, I stand before you as a voice for the voiceless—the many, many people who have been unjustly treated by Ohio's death penalty.

As someone who has had loved ones taken violently from my own family, I urge you, esteemed committee members, to think deeply about the real implications of the death penalty. My mother, Beatrice Winlock, was murdered in Youngstown, Ohio in 1991. My brother, Mark, was also murdered in 1996.

In his 2022 Capital Crimes Report, Attorney General Dave Yost estimated the cost of Ohio's death penalty to be anywhere between \$128 and \$314 million. This is a staggering amount of money to spend on a system that fails to deliver its promise to the families of victims the vast majority of the time. We know now that when a death sentence is handed down, it is far more likely that that person will die of natural causes or their sentence will be overturned or commuted. There are also the innocent people who have been sentenced to death, who are later exonerated. All told, it is exceedingly rare that Ohio actually executes someone and meanwhile, those families are waiting, waiting, waiting.

In our pursuit of justice, we must acknowledge an uncomfortable truth: our judicial system, while robust, is fallible. The innocent get wrongly convicted. In most cases, these errors can be rectified, but with the death penalty, the margin for error is non-existent. Since 1981, 11 individuals in Ohio's justice system have been exonerated from death row after evidence emerged proving their innocence— one of those people is in this room right now, Derrick Jamison. Consider the human cost, the potential loss of innocent life. Can we, in good conscience, allow for the risk of possible execution of even one innocent individual?

If justice is going to be meaningful, it must be swift, decisive, with no doubt as to who committed the crime. The death penalty isn't any of those things. The cases bounce between appeals for decades, being overturned one year, reinstated the next. The uncertainty is excruciating for families who have lost loved ones to murder. I believe Ohio could spend the money we waste on the death penalty to better serve families like mine: preventing crime in the first place, solving the 2,600 cold cases in Ohio, providing grief counseling and funeral services.

Let us choose a path that upholds the sanctity of life, especially when doubt exists. Let's end the death penalty in Ohio and be a beacon for justice, fairness, and humanity. Thank you for your time and consideration.