



House Government Oversight Committee

HB 55- Proponent Testimony

3/25/2021

Chairman Wilkin, Vice Chair White, Ranking Member Sweeney and members of the House Government Oversight Committee,

My name is Tracy Nájera, and I am the Executive Director for the Children's Defense Fund-Ohio. CDF-Ohio is a statewide non-profit organization which serves as an independent voice for all children. Our mission is to ensure every child a *Healthy Start*, a *Head Start*, a *Fair Start*, a *Safe Start* and a *Moral Start* in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. We work to champion policies and programs that lift children out of poverty, protect them from abuse and neglect, and ensure quality education as well as appropriate and targeted access to resources to meet children's health and nutrition needs.

The work you do here at the Statehouse is critical to Ohio's future. The policies you introduce, debate, and pass have tangible implications for Ohio's children and families. Therefore, it is critical that these policy decisions are informed by the everyday lives and experiences of Ohioans'. To do so, it is critical that you hear directly from your constituents themselves.

We urge your support of HB 55 because it will allow those most impacted by your decisions to provide input on policies considered before this body. HB 55 makes providing oral testimony accessible to all Ohioans, an issue of equity and access that transcends any political party (or "transcends any partisan divide").

Currently, the only way a person can speak on a bill is to do so in-person at the Statehouse. This presents numerous barriers and challenges for many Ohioans:

- **Transportation:** Under our current rules, people must find a way to get to the Statehouse to provide oral testimony. This assumes that they have access to a car or other transit options that can get them here. That is not the reality for many Ohioans.
- **Travel Time:** To provide oral testimony, Ohioans living in, for example, Hillsboro would have to commute a total of 3 hours just to have their voices heard; 5 hours for those living in Cleveland, and even longer for other parts of the state.
- **Time off of work or away from caregiving responsibilities:** For many, the time it takes to testify in combination with travel time, would require time off of work or away from caregiving responsibilities in order to testify. This hurts Ohio's workforce and our economy.
- **Costs:** There are many costs associated with travel to the Statehouse— child care, gas, parking garages, meters. Many cannot afford these costs and individuals should not have to pay to have their voice considered.



These barriers make it difficult for people, especially low-income Ohioans who cannot afford the transportation costs, to participate in their own *participatory* government. The results of limited participation and limited voice are, ultimately, limited policies that do not adequately address the diverse and wide-ranging needs of all of your Ohio constituents. Virtual testimony is equitable, it meets people where they are and allows everyone to more easily participate in our government.

Virtual testimony would allow Ohioans from across the state to voice themselves meaningfully to you. Ohioans should be able to testify on “kitchen table issues” without leaving their kitchen table. There are no rules prohibiting virtual testimony for legislative hearings. And other states have allowed virtual testimony. Allowing virtual testimony would not impose a heavy administrative burden and provides a low cost solution for a high value reward. Hearing from more Ohioans is an undeniably good thing. We urge your thoughtful consideration of this bill and what it means for your constituents.

We also urge you to standardize the testifying process, so that it is uniform across all committees. The current process of finding each Committee’s unique witness slip can be cumbersome and confusing. A single online or fillable form on the committee webpage will empower more Ohioans to participate in the democratic process.

When democracy is open for all of us, we all collectively benefit – especially our children, the future of Ohio.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this important issue.