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Ohio Senate
Government Oversight and Reform Committee
Testimony on Amended HB 137

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Chairman Coley, Vice Chair Uecker, Ranking Member, and members of the committee, thank you so much for the opportunity to offer testimony on Amended House Bill 137.

My name is Jessica Camargo and I am here on behalf of ACTION Ohio. ACTION Ohio is an alumni group of adults who experienced foster care personally, and who are dedicated to improving outcomes for the next generation. Before I get into the meat and potatoes of my testimony, I would like to remind everyone that April is Child Abuse Prevention Month. The state-wide awareness campaign in Ohio is today, which is why I am wearing blue. Coincidentally, this same color happens to represent the very important lives of police officers.

Every child wants to feel secure. Every child wants to feel safe. In our society, we generally teach children from a young age that the police are our friends. They are here to help us and keep us safe. If we are ever in need of help or fear for our safety, we can go to a police officer, because they will protect us. Our children believe us and often see police as someone they can trust, look up to and count on. I am so grateful to the police out there that are reporting child abuse or suspected abuse despite not being mandated. They have my utmost respect. Unfortunately, not all police officers are, because they are not mandated reporters.

Every state in our nation has statutes identifying professionals that have frequent contact with children and teenagers and requiring them to be mandated reporters. - but Ohio is the only state that doesn't include police officers on the list. This is shocking considering the unique position police officers are in. Police officers are usually the first responders to a scene. Many of the calls they respond to are domestic situations. Upon arrival, a police officer is trained to immediately scan the surroundings and pay attention to detail. In doing so, they are in the best position to spot warning signs of abuse. Taking a few minutes to report any suspicions to Children's Services, could preserve the life and outcome of a child or teen.

Further, over the years police have become more present in the halls of Ohio schools. It is crazy to think that the teachers in the schools are mandatory reporters, but the police there are not. It just doesn't make sense. Police in our schools, have more flexibility to move about the school compared to teachers. They are often more present in the halls, can hear more, and see more compared to teachers who may be limited to the classroom. By not making officers mandatory reporters, we are missing out on valuable opportunities to prevent further physical abuse. Considering, the PCSAO Factbook states that the #1 reason that children and teens enter foster care in the state of Ohio is physical abuse, we cannot let this oversight continue to go on. The time to act is now.

On a more personal level, I would like to say that I am very blessed to have a relationship as an adult with both of my parents. My parents are very supportive of everything I do, they love me, and I know they want the best for me. It took an incredible amount of counseling, understanding, and God's grace to have what we have now. Despite the story I am about to tell you, my parents fought vigorously for me, and did everything they could to improve upon the few shortcomings they had based on the limited tools their parents gave them. I am grateful for the parents I have despite the unfortunate circumstances we endured as a family years ago.

My story for you today, therefore, begins long before today and long before I was ever even born.

My parents were from a much older generation and the country where a good old fashioned "whipping" was often well beyond what we would consider appropriate today. My mother grew up in a home where her father would come home drunk, line them all up with a gun, and threaten to shoot them all. My father was brought up with a switch and a belt. He experienced watching his mother on several occasions put a gun to his step-father's head. My parents set out with the best of intentions when they became parents. They wanted what most parents want. They wanted better for their children. They wanted to be better parents than their parents ... and they were. My mom joined the PTA, she helped to teach dare which is why I never turned to drugs, and my dad was there for all my games and a presence in my life. They

taught me integrity, a good work ethic, and the importance of education. I would not be where I am today, if it wasn't for the values they instilled in me.

However, I was the youngest of six children. My 14-year-old sister got pregnant, she joined a gang, and an abundance of crazy things began to spiral. Stress began to flood the home. My parents began to struggle with the surmounting stress and total utter chaos it created. The more stressed they became, the more it impacted their discipline. The more physical discipline I got, the more I acted out against it. It became a power struggle, and an ever-escalating cycle. Without going into any further details, I eventually ended up in the foster-care system at age 11.

Nevertheless, when I was still at home, the police practically lived there. They came when my sister tried to kill herself on multiple occasions in front of me, the police were at our house when my sister threw a baby walker through our front window which I witnessed, the police were there when I refused to go to school because I couldn't find a pair of socks that felt comfortable enough to wear. The police were always at our house. They were there so much, they knew the house, they knew the number, they knew who we were. However, I am pretty sure there was a lack of reporting by the police, because children services were not exactly knocking at our door and asking questions.

Today, I stand in a unique position because in addition to be a former foster youth, I have a master's degree in Criminal Justice. I will be graduating from the University of Akron School of Law in May and taking the July Bar. Throughout law school, I have been a CASA through Voices for Children in Lorain County, Volunteered for Child and Family Advocates of Cuyahoga County, Clerked for Juvenile Judge Linda Teodosio in Summit County, worked as a teacher to children facing adversity through the Law and Leadership Program, worked in the Juvenile Division of the Public Defender's office in Cuyahoga County, currently sit on the Public Policy Committee of the Adoption Network, and I am the former activism chair of the University of Akron's Social Justice Club. In the capacity of the positions I have held, I have unfortunately seen and learned of occasions where a police officer should have reported and did not. As a result, of police not being mandated to report, it is foreseeable that some children have been and will continued to be abused longer.

As a former foster youth, and advocate for children, I find it completely unacceptable that police officers are still not mandatory reporters almost 26 years later from the time I entered the foster care system till now. We must do better. This can't continue. As we speak now, children are being physically abused, and somewhere there may be a police officer who knows something, who could pick up the phone, and just make that call, or choose to do nothing and let it continue. Passing this bill is a no brainer. There shouldn't be an option, because the risk of not reporting could result in serious consequences including death.

I strongly urge you to pass this bill. Thank you for your time. I would be happy to answer any questions.

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