

*TESTIMONY OF HOLLY HARRIS, PRESIDENT AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE JUSTICE ACTION NETWORK, BEFORE THE SENATE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE
MAY 15, 2019*

OFFERED IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 3

Mr. Chairman, Honorable Members of the Committee:

My name is Holly Harris, and I am the Executive Director of the Justice Action Network, the largest bipartisan organization working at the state and federal level to make our justice system fairer and more effective, and make our communities safer.

I was in Washington yesterday at the bipartisan Congressional Club's First Lady's luncheon. I was sitting with spouses of members of Congress from Kentucky, Texas, Florida...and conversation almost immediately turned to the First Step Act, the bipartisan federal sentencing and prison reform legislation that Pres. Trump signed into law late last year. And of course I got all the questions about that journey, and how such a piece of legislation was able despite all the drama in Washington, and the acidic political environment that seems to swallow almost every other policy initiative.

Well of course the answer for me was simple: the states charted the pathway, and it was governors from red, blue, and purple states who convinced our "tough-on-crime" President that criminal justice reform was just that.

But one state stood above the rest as a shining example of what leaders like all of you can do when you put your people above partisanship, and achieve real solutions to your state's greatest challenges: Ohio.

When we launched the Justice Action Network almost four years ago, we started with three target states: Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. And the very first bill we helped pass was here in the Buckeye State, and that was HB 56, ban the box. Since then, we've helped to pass aggressive civil asset forfeiture reforms, increased access to record sealing, and significant expansions to alternatives to prison for low-level, non-violent offenders.

But we didn't start the fire here in Ohio. Years before my organization even existed, the Ohio legislature passed significant reentry measures under a Democratic Governor that took Ohio's recidivism rate from 40% to 27%, and then justice reinvestment measures under a Republican Governor that curbed the disturbing explosion of your prison population.

Battleground Ohio, perhaps more than any other state, was the driver of the First Step Act at the federal level. Because what happens here immediately rises to national prominence. And with Senate Bill 3, you have the opportunity to further extend that legacy, and take the next step toward ensuring a fairer, more effective justice system.

While there are dozens of reasons to support this legislation, the two that seem most compelling are 1) the positive impact on public safety, and 2) the mandate from the people of Ohio.

Over the past decade, the ten states that have most significantly reduced their incarceration rates through the reforms at issue today have shown an average drop in their crime rates of 19%. Conversely, the ten states that have most significantly increased their incarceration rates by continuing to employ unduly harsh penalties have shown an average drop in their crime rates of just 11%. The bottom line is this: when you throw people convicted of low-level, non-violent offenses behind bars for long stretches with people who are true threats to others, you churn out better criminals, not better citizens. And states that send sick people to treatment, and reserve incarceration for the dangerous among us see better outcomes. That's precisely what this legislation seeks to do.

Just as compelling, the people of Ohio have issued a mandate for a smarter justice system. Today, we released a poll that shows a whopping 87% of Ohioans from the right to the left support sentencing reforms. More specifically, when asked if people found in possession of high amounts of drugs should be treated as traffickers, while those caught with smaller amounts of drugs, many of whom are addicts, should be diverted into treatment rather than prison... 80% of respondents approved, including 80% of women respondents.

In fact, we polled all the policies included in Senate Bill 3, and not one polls below 80% approval from Ohio voters. It is so rare to see an issue that unifies people like

criminal justice reform. Make no mistake, Ohioans understand these issues, and sadly it's because no state has been more impacted by the opioid crisis than Ohio. And you cannot truly impact the drug crisis without implementing smart justice reforms. The two go hand-in-hand.

I want to thank President Obhof for his leadership, Senators Eklund and O'Brien for their willingness to work across the aisle and spearhead this effort, the countless conservative and progressive groups working for reform in this state, and most importantly, the people of Ohio for this overwhelming support for this initiative. We urge swift movement of the Next Step Act, which would mark a tremendous achievement to cap the hard work of the last four years, and perhaps reignite a national movement. For as goes Ohio, so goes the country.