

Barbara Thomas
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September 24, 2019

Representative Graham Filler
House of Representatives
P.O. Box 30014
Lansing, MI 48909-7514

Re: HB 4980-85

I want to thank Representative Filler and the entire House Judiciary for considering legislation that would expand set asides and automate the process for certain convictions. This is critical as I know first hand that a conviction does not end when you get off parole or probation, but rather is a lifelong stigmatization that keeps God-fearing people from meaningful employment and a full life. This package is important, but it does not go far enough.

My name is Barbara Thomas. I am a mother. I am a grandmother. I am a college graduate. I am a helping hand. I am a social worker. And I am formerly incarcerated. I want to share a little of my story so that you understand that when you deny people access to a clean slate, you limit the potential and capacity of your citizenry, and you create a sense of hopelessness that I know all too well.

At a very young age, I was raped by my brother – an act so violent and indecent that it convinced me that I was not worthy. I was just a teenager when I started to use drugs to cope with the physical and psychological trauma. I became a mother at just 13-years old, and then again at 14. My children's father abused me for over 20 years.

As is often the case with sex work, I was lured in as a result of my addiction as it escalated as a mechanism to mask my pain, my hurt, and suffering. I was convicted and sent to prison.

I have been clean for 17 years. I have raised three sons. One of which I lost to gun violence. I went back to school as an adult and earned a Bachelors Degree in Sociology. I knew that my calling was to help others, be the hand to lift them up and out of addiction, pain, and trauma. God put me here for that reason: to counsel and use my own experience to ensure that no other woman goes through that alone.

I earned certification as a peer drug recovery specialist. And eventually, I got my dream job, working in the Women's Resource Center in Grand Rapids – a program I had gone through myself. And yet, when the executive director left, I was fired because of my conviction history. I applied to other facilities. They would tell me how great I was

As a 50-year old woman, I now work the third shift in a factory making \$13 an hour. I often don't sleep so that I can take care of my grandbabies. I know that God put me here for a reason and so I try to help the men that come in on my shift – knowing that they too are suffering. I am so grateful, but I am devastated that I cannot use my skills to do the work I was put on this earth to do. No one will hire me. Not a one. All I want to do is pour my skills into making this world a better place.

Why am I continuing to pay for something that is over 20 years old? Why am I continuing to pay for something that I paid for in prison? Do I have to pay for it for the rest of my life? When you say rehabilitation what exactly do you mean, because I have been redeemed by God and I continue to be punished by my state. We carry this for life. Please expand eligibility in the most expansive way possible. Let us be whole. Let me be whole.

Thank you once again to the committee for this opportunity to testify.

Sincerely,

Barbara Thomas