

Marcus Winn, Metro Organization for Racial and Economic Equity

Testimony Supporting HB2544

House Judiciary Hearing

February 6, 2020 3:30 p.m.

Kansas State Capitol Room 346-S

Good afternoon, my name is Marcus Winn and I am here as a staff member of Metro Organization for Racial and Economic Equity, often referred to as “more-squared.” I live in Kansas City, KS and work around the Kansas metro region and beyond. We are a faith-based organization made up of over 3 dozen congregations of faith and, additionally, dozens of individual members.

As an organization we feel compelled to testify in support of this bill because we have witnessed the injustices and violations of our common values present in our current system. Our mission, embedded in the name of the organization, is to organize and empower local communities around the cause of racial and economic equity. The data is clear, those most impacted by the inequities of our criminal justice system are predominantly people of color and the poor.

We believe that the issue before you today, jailhouse witnesses, represents one glimpse of a larger vision, which I hope we all share. That vision is neither conservative nor liberal, but a shared American ideal: liberty and justice for all. Quite simply, More squared is here today, because we believe our faith calls us to pursue liberty and justice FOR ALL, and we believe that the passage of this bill will bring us one step closer to that vision.

The current use of jailhouse witnesses, within a system that lacks transparency, worsens the issue of wrongful convictions and incarceration, undermines the credibility of our courts, and risks the public safety.

Many of us across Kansas are acutely aware of the problem of wrongful convictions, as we celebrated the news just this week that our own Lamonte McIntyre will finally have his innocence acknowledged by the state. Nearly 20% of DNA exonerations across the nation involve jailhouse witness testimony as a contributing factor, due to the strong incentive to give a prosecutor what they want in exchange for a leniency in their own case.

Such wrongful convictions, as well as the lack of transparency in the current use of jailhouse witnesses, undermine the public trust in the integrity of our judicial processes. Trust is the bedrock upon which our justice system must be built, and when it is missing we risk the stability and sustainability of our the public institutions.

When untransparent jailhouse witness testimony leads a court to a wrongful conviction, the actual perpetrator of the crime remains free and unaccountable. This situation poses a continued risk toward victims and the public at large. Not only must we trust that the innocent will be free, but we must trust that the guilty will be held accountable.

For the sake of liberty and justice for all, More Squared supports this legislation and asks that you do as well. Thank you.