

Chair W. C. Smith, Jr., Vice-Chair J. D. Waldstreicher, and Esteemed Members of the Judiciary Proceedings Committee:

My name is Melanie Reese, I am the Executive Director of Older Women Embracing Life. I am here in support of House Bill 287, HIV is not a crime but the law I am here to change says that say it is.

I became HIV+ during a date rape. However, I would not even think of prosecuting my attacker for giving me HIV because it would not change my status. It would not make me HIV-, but only put another HIV+ Black individual at risk for incarceration, doing further harm to individuals & communities that are already overpoliced, prosecuted & criminalized.

As a sexual assault survivor, I believe a disease specific law puts women at risk for domestic & intimate partner violence. The person perpetrating violence, can use the law as control over a victim 'you prosecute me & I'll kill you'

Even in situations like these I have empathy, navigating HIV is often difficult because of stigma & managing the disease itself. Criminal laws such as this one contribute to that stigma & prevent people from wanting to know their own status. An individual should never be prosecuted for being HIV+.

HIV Criminalization is particularly harmful to Black, Indigenous & LGBTQ communities who face higher rates of diagnosis. More practically, the current law does not follow medical science & treatment advances. With treatment as prevention & U=U, HIV cannot be transmitted.

I didn't immediately accept my status but being HIV+ was the best thing that happened to me because I learned to love myself & that I was enough. I wouldn't have begun that journey without my diagnosis. Before my diagnosis, I believed I was powerless, but now I feel powerful & help others, especially women, empower themselves.