

FIRST PERSON: OHIO EMERGES AS NATIONAL LEADER ON PREVENTING HAZING AND ITS TRAGIC CONSEQUENCES

Collin's Law mixes stiffer penalties with comprehensive anti-hazing campus plan



by Ohio Sen. Stephanie Kunze
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"Three years ago my family was awoken in the middle of the night to find two police officers and a chaplain who were there to tell us that our beautiful 18-year-old son, Collin, was found dead at 45 Mill Street in Athens, Ohio.

"We knew the address immediately. We knew it was the address of Collin's fraternity house. That's all we knew.

"In the months to follow, we began to learn more about the details that led to Collin's death, and we learned that for the last weeks of Collin's life, Collin had endured extreme, tortuous hazing.

"He was beaten, he was belted, he was water boarded, and he was forced drugs and alcohol. Since that most horrific night, our family, both individually and collectively, has experienced the most painful type of heartbreak imaginable, because of hazing."

~ Kathleen Wiant

Collin's mother, Kathleen Wiant, and the Wiant family are my constituents.

I was introduced to them shortly after the death of Collin, and worked with them over the past three years to create legislation that would increase penalties for hazing, enhance education of the dangers of it, and bring more transparency to instances that take place on our college campuses in Ohio.

I am inspired by the strength and determination that Kathleen showed during the time we worked together on this issue. That included her impactful testimony to our General Assembly.

"We don't want another family to go through the pain and loss our family has experienced. ... No family should ever have to go through what our family has gone through."

Sadly, the family of Stone Foltz, a sophomore at Bowling Green State University who passed away from hazing in March, experienced that pain.

We heard from the Foltz family as well, along with the powerful words of Tyler Perino, a young man who survived a hazing incident.

From their stories came our mission:

stop hazing on college campuses and prevent other families from losing loved ones.

Together with my colleague, Sen. Theresa Gavarone, we worked with a wide range of stakeholders on crafting and refining a bill called "Collin's Law." Along the way, we heard and learned from prosecutors, police, university leaders, the North American Interfraternity Council (representing 58 national fraternities), and the National Panhellenic Conference (representing 26 national sororities).

The end result: SB 126, legislation that was signed into law earlier this year and that has the potential to make Ohio a national leader in anti-hazing reform.

ENDING THE HAZING CULTURE

Collin's Law contains a more strict set of criminal penalties that will help to curb hazing culture by deterring individuals and organizations.

Under SB 126, an instance of hazing resulting in serious physical harm is now a third-degree felony, and the criminal penalty for recklessly participating in or permitting hazing is now a second-degree misdemeanor.

In addition, we now have new reporting requirements for school administrators and employees, faculty members and others. For them, the failure to report a hazing incident is a fourth-degree or a first-degree misdemeanor (a more serious charge occurs if the hazing incident caused serious physical harm).

We also have directed our chancellor of the Ohio Department of Higher Education to develop a statewide plan for preventing hazing.

This plan will have two critical components.

One is new guidelines for anti-hazing education and training on our college campuses — for students, school administrators and faculty, as well as organizations recognized by, or operating under the sanction of, an institution.

Two, the chancellor will develop a model anti-hazing policy and distribute it to all institutions of higher education in Ohio.

In turn, each of these institutions must have its own anti-hazing policy in place. (Use of the chancellor's model policy is one option.) All student organizations will receive the policy, which will be posted on a university's website. These schools also will provide students with an online or in-person educational

program on hazing.

Taken together, our new statewide plan emphasizes the importance of hazing-prevention education, intervention strategies, accountability for violations, and public acknowledgment when incidents occur.

Our goal with this legislation was not only to enhance penalties, but to push for a change in campus culture. Increased consequences for hazing show how serious we as a state will take hazing. The education pieces in Collin's Law help our colleges and universities recognize the signs and dangers of hazing.

Parents and students deserve and need access to information on the behaviors of organizations sanctioned for hazing.

Universities will now be required to have a website where parents and students can access this information so they can make educated, informed decisions about what organizations to join, or not join.

Had this provision been in effect when Collin was pledging a fraternity, his family would have been able to see that his fraternity had previously sent a pledge to the emergency room. The cause was a pledging activity that led to a gash in his head requiring eight staples.

Working on this law has been a challenging and emotional experience, both as a legislator and as a mother of college-aged children myself.

The bravery and courage of the Wiant, Foltz and Perino families has been inspiring. They are truly the heroes in ensuring that their stories are seen and heard to effect change.



Students at Ohio University Sorority and Fraternity Life lead a letter-writing campaign earlier in support of anti-hazing legislation. SB 126, or Collin's Law, was signed by Gov. Mike DeWine in July. (photo: North American Interfraternity Conference)

HOW OHIO'S RECENTLY ENACTED COLLIN'S LAW DEFINES HAZING AND PUNISHES THE BEHAVIOR

DEFINITION

"Coercing another, including the victim, to do any act of initiation into any student or other organization or any act to continue or reinstate membership in or affiliation with any student or other organization that causes or creates a substantial risk of causing mental or physical harm to any person, including coercing another to consume alcohol or a drug of abuse."

PUNISHMENT

- third-degree felony for hazing (including coerced consumption of alcohol or drugs) that results in serious physical harm
- second-degree misdemeanor for recklessly participating in, or permitting, hazing
- second- or fourth-degree misdemeanor for failing to report hazing

One of the things that I am most grateful for is the fact that more than 25,000 students from universities across Ohio voiced their support for Collin's Law. I believe this is the generation that will end the barbaric practice of hazing, and deliver on my hope that no other family will be awoken to that knock at the door.

Stephanie Kunze is currently serving her second term in the Ohio Senate and previously was a member of the state House of Representatives.

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