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TO: JOINT COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC SAFETY

FR: JUDITH ARMATTA

DA: MAY 18, 2013

RE: SUPPORT FOR A-4 and A-5 AMENDMENTS TO HB 3253A

Honorable Chairman Prozanski and members of the Committee:

My name is Judith Armatta. I am an attorney and human rights activist. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the above-captioned legislation to remove some youth from the sex offender registry.

Nobody likes a sex offender. Say the words and we envision Ariel Castro, after he was arrested. Before, everyone thought he was just a regular guy. So, when 13 year old Johnny touches the private parts of his 10 year old sister, we believe he will grow into Ariel Castro. Once charged, Johnny loses his individual identity and becomes solely a sex offender. To protect our children, we brand him and require him to put his name on a registry of sex offenders, easily accessible to anyone for whatever reason. His actual crime is not identified, nor the age at which he committed it. He is a sex offender. All we need to know.

As a result of being labeled a sex offender, Johnny is condemned to the margins of society. Prohibited from certain kinds of employment, he will have difficulty finding any work at all -- and finding a place to live. It is perfectly legal to discriminate against people with sex offender convictions. Few will ask the circumstances of his offense. They will assume he is like Ariel Castro.

In our culture a sex offender bears the same stigma as a terrorist. He is the worst of the worst and he can never redeem himself. Once a sex offender always a sex offender. No longer a part of the human community, all manner of acts against him are justified, including murder. Anyone bearing this label is stigmatized, youth more so as they face the cruelty of their peers with little self-regard to counter it. It leads some to suicide.

Sexual violence is a serious problem in this country. Many survivors continue to suffer long term psychological harm. Yet in our desperation to protect those we love, we support laws that do the opposite. Mandatory registration of anyone convicted of a sex crime (encompassing a broad range of behavior from the sexual curiosity of children to rape) does just the opposite. As a recent study by Human Rights Watch concluded, “[C]ontrary to common public perceptions, the empirical evidence suggests that putting youth offenders on registries does not advance

community safety – including because it overburdens law enforcement with large numbers of people to monitor, undifferentiated by their dangerousness.”<sup>i</sup> While we search the registry and organize to remove anyone convicted of a sex offense from our neighborhood, ‘Uncle George’ or ‘Father Mike’ (neither ever convicted of a sex offense) have more room to prey on our children.

The sex offender registry, originally meant as a tool for law enforcement to track the most dangerous offenders, now benefits those very offenders while causing grievous harm to thousands of others and encouraging the public to rest on the mistaken belief that the registry is making us safer. As Human Rights Watch reported, “Available research indicates that sex offenders, and particularly people who commit sex offenses as children, are among the least likely to reoffend.”

HB 3253 –A4 and A5, removing some youth from the registry, will improve safety for survivors and potential victims, while providing youthful offenders a way forward to become contributing members of our community. I urge the Committee to pass this legislation. Thank you.

Respectfully,

Judith Armatta  
Attorney at Law

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<sup>i</sup> “Raised on the Registry: The Irreparable Harm of Placing Children on Sex Offender Registries in the U.S.,” 2013, p. 3.