



Testimony in support of HB 115

Assistant Chief of Police Jon Scowden, Westerville Division of Police

Wednesday, March 29, 2017

Good afternoon Chairman Ginter and Members of this distinguished House Community and Family Advancement Committee.

My name is Jon Scowden. I am an Assistant Chief of Police at the Westerville Division of Police and have been a police officer for almost 26 years. I am also the proud father of a wonderful 22 year old son who is Autistic and a licensed driver in the Great State of Ohio. I am here to submit testimony in support of HB 115.

When my wife and I found out in 1997 that our son Tyler was Autistic, it was a crushing blow to us. We did not understand Autism, nor did we know what Tyler would be capable of in the future. Fast forward to the present, and Tyler has far exceeded our hopes and expectations. Tyler has graduated from high school and is now participating in the workforce.

In 2014 we began to wonder if Tyler would ever be able to drive a vehicle, and since he had far exceeded other milestones we felt we would give it a try. We contacted his case worker at the Knox County Board of MRDD and they put us in touch with a company who assesses people with disabilities to see if they are able to drive. They sent someone out to assess Tyler, and we received a report that Tyler would be a good candidate. He told us to have Tyler take his temporary license test and if he passed, to call him back.

We weren't sure that Tyler would pass the test right away, but once again he surprised us and passed on his first attempt. A few short months later Tyler passed his driving test and received his driver's license. This certainly thrilled my wife and I, however, it also scared us. One thing that I was fearful about was him being stopped for a traffic offense by a police officer. Since he has limited communication skills and does not make eye contact, I had a fear of him not following commands in a timely manner and the officer assuming he was impaired. There are documented incidents of encounters escalating into an arrest because of this situation. Those thoughts have actually awoken me in the middle of the night several times. I discussed my fears with my chief, Chief Joseph Morbitzer, who encouraged me to look into remedies.

As I was researching potential solutions a few months later, I was contacted by Carolyn Gutowski who was advocating for Oakstone Academy, a school that integrates Autistic children with mainstream children. She wanted to set up a meeting to discuss the police department conducting training for Autistic children to teach what to expect when

encountering a police officer. A meeting was set up with Carolyn, several therapists, school administrators, and several officers from the police department and a course of action began to be developed.

During the formulation of the training, it became apparent that we needed to not only train the children, but we also needed to train the officers on what types of behaviors people with Autism and other developmental disabilities might display. At my department as well as most departments in the Central Ohio region, many officers, if not all, receive CIT (Critical Incident Training). That training is tremendously helpful in teaching the officers to deescalate situations, however, it only touches slightly on dealing with developmental disabilities. Our hope is that this training would be a linchpin from the CIT training to give the officers more skills to handle those with communication issues.

We also knew we would need to propose legislature for some type of voluntary registry that would alert police officers to when they are dealing with an Autistic person or a person with any other type of disability where they have trouble communicating or their behavior could be misread or misunderstood. HB 115 takes care of this part of the issue.

Our training program is almost complete and will be introduced in mid-June 2017. It is our hope that this program will eventually expand statewide.

With all of that being said, I just wish to throw my full support behind H.B. 115. As a father who has a child on the Autism spectrum and who is also a driver in this state, I feel that it is very important for him to be able to notify the officer prior to their interaction. As a law enforcement officer, I feel that this could make the outcome of each interaction safer and much more positive. This bill makes sense for the health and welfare of not only the disabled person, but for the officers themselves. Any information that the officer can know ahead of time when dealing with the public makes the encounter safer for all and can even help deescalate tense situations more quickly.

Thank you for your time and consideration and for allowing me to speak with you today. If there are any questions I would be happy to answer them at this time.