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H.B. 349 Testimony – January 23, 2018

Mr. Chairman and members of the House Criminal Justice Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today in favor of House Bill number 349, to add search and rescue dogs and horses to already existing legislation that prescribes penalties for harming, harassing, or interfering with police dogs and horses in the performance of their duties.

I speak to you today as a former police K-9 officer, current Ohio Peace Officer, and currently certified professional volunteer Search and Rescue Technician and K-9 handler. Throughout the state of Ohio, law enforcement agencies call upon professionally trained and certified volunteer Search and Rescue resources to assist police in searching for, rescuing, and/or recovering lost and missing persons and reunifying them with their families and loved ones. Some of the most valuable resources that these professional SAR volunteers offer are highly trained dogs and horses. Although some law enforcement agencies have their own canine and equine resources, SAR dogs and horses are trained to perform functions, different than police dogs and horses, which supplement their abilities.

Professional SAR volunteers spend thousands of dollars and countless personal hours being trained and certified as Search and Rescue Technicians. Some of those SAR technicians take additional steps to specialize in canine or equine search and rescue. In addition to the human training involved in being a SAR technician, SAR canine handlers and equine personnel spend additional personal money and time to train and certify their dogs and horses. When called upon, professional SAR technicians respond to assist, never asking for, nor accepting any reimbursement for

their services. Such dedication and commitment by these professional volunteers provides value to Ohio's law enforcement agencies and to Ohio citizens.

Missing person calls are most often initially a law enforcement mission. Until enough facts are gathered through investigation, the nature of the incident is not immediately known. The three-year old reported missing may have been abducted or may have simply wandered away from home. While law enforcement officials investigate the possibility of criminal activity, SAR professionals work side-by-side with law enforcement, managing a simultaneous search and rescue investigation and operation. Both investigations continue until one is confirmed and all resources are then devoted to the appropriate aspect of the investigation.

In the course of their duties, SAR dogs and horses may encounter the same types of interference as police dogs and horses. Sometimes SAR teams enter private property either unknowingly or accompanied by law enforcement as part of the investigation. Although distinguishably marked, SAR animals may be subject to various actions by hostile property owners. It may also be the case that the subject of the search was not initially known to be a criminal actor and, when the SAR dog or horse makes contact with the subject, there is potential for harm. There are many other examples I could provide as to the potential for dangers faced by SAR dogs and horses.

H.B. 349 is one step the State of Ohio can take to recognize the value that professionally trained and certified SAR dogs and horses provide, at no cost, to law enforcement agencies and to the citizens of Ohio. I strongly encourage you to

support this bill and help protect our canine and equine partners. Thank you very much.