

Representative Tom Patton
House Bill 161 Sponsor Testimony
House Insurance Committee
May 24, 2017

Chairman Brinkman, Vice Chair Henne, Ranking Member Bocchieri, and Members of the Insurance Committee:

I thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on House Bill 161.

This legislation, if enacted, would make peace officers and firefighters diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder arising from employment without an accompanying physical injury eligible for compensation and benefits under Ohio's Workers' Compensation Law.

In 2013 the Supreme Court of Ohio determined in *Armstrong v. John R. Jurgensen Company* that an individual seeking workers' compensation for a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder claim was ineligible to receive benefits if he or she did not have a compensable physical injury that caused their PTSD. While I greatly respect and admire the legal judgment and knowledge of our Supreme Court, I believe that this verdict could have unintended consequences for police officers and firefighters in our communities who have witnessed horrible traumatic events that can potentially leave them mentally scarred.

All too frequently, our hard-working and dedicated public safety personnel witness scenes of violence, carnage, death, and serious injury, as a regular part of their service to the people of Ohio. Exposure to these environments can cause lasting psychological impairment for anyone, including veteran police officers and experienced firefighters with years of training and exposure to stressful situations. House Bill 161 will provide deserving avenues of relief for first responders who have bravely served the public and suffer from PTSD as a result of performing their duties.

Several other states have passed similar legislation to include coverage for PTSD diagnosed among first responders. Most recently Connecticut, inspired in part by the plight of Newtown police officer Thomas Bean who was nearly fired after using up his accumulated sick and worker's compensation time while battling PTSD after responding to the shootings at Sandy Hook elementary school. South Carolina and New York also have similar legislation.

An ongoing challenge is that first responders do not often take advantage of help through their employee assistance programs for PTSD related problems. Sometimes people are able to recover from acute stress disorder using their own coping methods and support from friends and family. However, recovery may be more difficult for some first responders, as they are exposed to major traumatic events and to chronically stressful situations. Unfortunately, there exists a real stigma around seeking help for emotional problems. Early detection of symptoms

and treatment can significantly decrease short-term problems, but first responders often wait until it is too late to seek professional help.

In this field of work, many consider it a sign of weakness and believe that negative perceptions will result from seeking help for conditions of mental trauma. Under these circumstances first responders may revert to alcohol or drug use or engage in other forms of maladaptive coping that can affect them on the job and influence how they interact with others. Untreated PTSD symptoms also contribute to the significantly high rates of depression and suicide, particularly among police officers.

According to the Coalition for Healthy Communities, experiencing such horrific events with severe or repeated exposure can cause serious PTSD symptoms such as increased anxiety, sleeplessness, anger, substance abuse, relationship problems, suicidal thoughts, and the inability to perform a job. These brave men and women who serve our families should not be left to deal with such illnesses on their own simply because Ohio law does not consider these illnesses comparable to a physical injury.

According to the Ohio Police and Fire Pension Fund, only 13 officers out of over 70,000 active duty policemen and firefighters retired on a mental health disability in 2013. This demonstrates the limited--but important--effect this legislation will have.

Since I began work on this issue (roughly six years ago), I have spoken with police officers, firefighters, and their respective representing organizations from around the state who have shared personal experiences that convinced me this legislation was absolutely necessary. Several of these individuals have expressed a strong interest in coming to Columbus to share their testimony with the members of this committee.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I hope you will join me in supporting this legislation. At this time, I would be happy to answer any questions.