

43rd Ohio House District

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J. Todd Smith
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Criminal Justice

Primary and Secondary Education

State and Local Government

Subcommittee on Criminal Sentencing

Commission on Minority Health

Commission on Fatherhood

Sponsor Testimony for H.B. 291

Thank you Chairman Hambley, Vice Chairman Patton, Ranking Member Brown, and Members of the House Civil Justice Committee for allowing me to offer sponsor testimony today for House Bill 291, which seeks to provide testimonial privilege for communications between first responders and their peer supporters.

The impetus of this bill originated from a group of fire fighters who met with me described the issues they are experiencing on the department level with mental health and emotional stress. First responders regularly encounter traumatic situations while on the job, including frequent experiences with death.

These everyday emergencies take a huge toll on their mental health so in response, industry experts have developed “peer support teams” to be used in response to such traumatic events. Peer support programs are a crucial component of the mental health support system for first responders following a critical incident. I’d like to share with you a few facts and figures provided by the Ohio Association of Professional Fire Fighters:

- In 2017, nearly 250 first responders committed suicide.
- Suicide rates for firefighters are 20% higher than the general population.
- According to a survey of Ohio’s fire and EMS providers, 81% have experienced signs or symptoms associated with emotional stress.
- First responders are 50% more likely to develop behavioral health conditions such as depression and PTSD.

Because their communication is not considered privileged, sometimes there can be apprehension and hesitation to seek that initial step in receiving help. By passing this bill into law we can help eliminate the hesitation to seek help and ultimately,

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reduce the number of suicides in our communities. Thank you for your time and I
look forward to answering any questions you may have.