



**Representative Joe Miller, Ohio House District 56
House Criminal Justice Committee - HB 208 Testimony
June 20, 2019**

Chairman Lang, Vice Chair Plummer, Ranking Member Leland, and members of the House Criminal Justice Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony alongside my co-sponsor, Representative Bill Roemer, on House Bill 208. This legislation is vitally important to protect sports officials in Ohio, and ensure that we are able to recruit and retain the next generation of field hockey umpires, soccer referees, lacrosse officials, and everything in between.

This is a topic that is close to my heart. I have been a basketball referee for over 20 years, and also have experience officiating volleyball and baseball. While not as experienced as my co-sponsor, I have served as a coach for youth sports. I have also been a parent watching in the stands, and I was a student athlete myself. So I have experience from all the different vantage points you'll find at a sporting event, and I understand the tremendous benefits that sports can provide. That is why it is imperative for us to maintain a safe and welcoming environment for everyone involved.

As my co-sponsor discussed, HB 208 brings the penalty for assaulting a sports officials in line with the same protection afforded to teachers and administrators. It also brings Ohio up to speed with 21 other states that have some type of additional protection for sports officials against assault¹.

Why are so many states around the country taking action on this issue? One of the biggest reasons is the dwindling pool of qualified officials. The Ohio High School Athletic Association has decried the "alarming shortage" of high school officials, primarily because four out of five new officials don't stick around for more than two years. Of those that quit, 75 percent cited "adult behavior" as their primary motivation for leaving².

In my time as a referee, I have been lucky enough to avoid any confrontations that would fall under the scope of HB 208. Even so, I have witnessed the "mob mentality" that can be set off in

¹ <https://www.naso.org/resources/legislation/sports-officials-legislative-scorecard/>

² <https://ohsaa.org/news-media/articles/ArtMID/2006/ArticleID/421/From-The-NFHS-A-Message-to-Parents-of-Ohio-High-School-Athletes>

an instant: one controversial call, one game-altering violation is all it takes. In those tense moments, officials need to know they have the full weight of the law behind them.

Recently, a story came out of a youth basketball tournament in Kentucky that illustrates the dangers officials face. As sometimes happens, a coach and a referee were having a heated discussion. When the referee turned and walked away, the coach punched the 61-year-old referee, knocking him unconscious and breaking his collarbone³. Keep in mind, these referees are not getting paid big bucks for their troubles. I can tell you firsthand he probably made between \$20 and \$50 for that game.

Ohio needs to do more to protect our officials, and avoid this looming crisis before referee shortages become a major obstacle for scheduling sporting events. HB 208 sends an unmistakable message that we will not tolerate assault on sports officials.

Thank you for your time and attention. I would be happy to answer any questions the committee may have.

³ <https://usatodayhss.com/2019/michigan-youth-basketball-coach-arrested-assaulted-referee>