



# Major Crimes Unit

*Fairfield County - Athens County - Logan - Circleville*

House Health Committee

Proponent Testimony

House Bill 58

Chairman Merrin, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Member Boyd, and members of the House Health Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present proponent testimony on House Bill 58.

My name is Dennis Lowe and I am the Commander of the Major Crimes Unit, a multijurisdictional Law Enforcement Task Force who services the citizens of Fairfield County, Athens County, the City of Logan, and the City of Circleville. In addition to my role as the Commander of the Major Crimes Unit, I am also the Past President of the Ohio Narcotics Officer Association, President of the Ohio Task Force Commanders Association, a member of the Ohio Department of Public Safety Drug Enforcement Executive Committee, and the Ohio delegate to the National Narcotics Officer Association Coalition. I began my career in Law Enforcement thirty-five years ago and have spent the past thirty-one years in the specialized field of drug enforcement.

Throughout my career I have investigated drug offenses throughout the state of Ohio. Those investigations ranged from the most seemingly insignificant of offenses to the disruption and dismantlement of large scale drug trafficking organizations responsible for supplying communities across our great state with illegal narcotics. As you are no doubt aware Ohio is ground zero for what many have called the greatest drug epidemic ever faced by our nation. The proliferation of drugs and drug addiction has affected every community in our state, putting a strain on public safety resources, social service providers, medical professionals, and our citizens.

This proliferation of drugs is largely fueled by two things, the disease of addiction and greed. Our state faces a crisis in which a user/addict-based population traffics in small user amounts of drugs like heroin, synthetic opioids like fentanyl and methamphetamine, and commits the associated crimes of theft, fraud, and crimes against persons while both domestic and foreign based criminal organizations use this crisis to increase their vast profits by exploiting those suffering from drug addiction.

Over the course of my career regardless of the drug involved one thing remained consistent, that being the exchange of goods and services for drugs. Although cash has always been a preferred method of payment virtually every drug trafficker especially those at the lower end of the organizational hierarchy has been willing to or even encouraged other forms of payment in exchange for drugs. Those payments include stolen property, sexual favors, and often the EBT SNAP electronic benefit cards. As an undercover officer it was common for me to use at that time food stamps and untaxed cigarettes as a form of payment for illegal narcotics. Not only was this form of payment widely accepted it also served to provide me instant credibility as “Bad guy” in my undercover roles. I assure you that if I were still operating as an undercover officer today I would use EBT SNAP electronic benefit cards as payment for drugs or accept them as payment in reverse sting operations.

As this committee reads my testimony today Police Officers and Drug Enforcement Officers across Ohio are seizing and purchasing drugs, executing search warrants on suspected drug houses and arresting drug offenders. Those officers WILL confiscate EBT SNAP electronic benefit cards as a result of their enforcement actions. At my Task Force alone we seize these cards in approximately 85% of our drug arrests, these cards almost never belong to the person under arrest, but rather have been traded

or exchanged as currency for illegal narcotics. Just this past week my officers arrested an individual who was in possession of three (3) of these cards, none of which were in this person's name.

Because we know that drug addiction and drug related crime occurs at higher rates at or below the poverty level it is often the case that those affected by the disease of addiction use whatever means are at their disposal to obtain illegal drugs. In many cases this involves the exchange of their EBT SNAP electronic benefit cards. In one recent arrest the Major Crimes Unit confiscated ten cards from one trafficker. It is also common practice for these cards to be accepted as payment at a reduced rate than the actual value left on the card, in most cases the cards are traded at fifty cents or less on the dollar further exploiting those in need.

As someone who has seen the negative impact of drug use, drug trafficking, and the associated crime in our communities from a very unique perspective I believe that House Bill 58 will reduce the use of EBT SNAP electronic benefit cards as a form of currency to purchase illegal drugs. It is the anonymity of the current system which makes this form of payment attractive to those involved in the drug trade. By placing identification photos of those issued the cards directly on them I am confident that drug users and drug traffickers will be far less likely to accept them as payment, and those issued the cards will be more likely to use them explicitly for their intended purpose and not as "Free money" to purchase narcotics.

The EBT SNAP electronic benefit card program benefits thousands of Ohioans each day as a means to obtain food in which to feed their families and provide nourishment to the most vulnerable of Ohio's citizens, our children. It is unfortunate that some choose to use these cards to feed their drug habits leaving those children at risk.

With the passage of House Bill 58 I believe that this committee has an opportunity to greatly reduce or eliminate the fraudulent use of these cards to purchase illegal drugs while simultaneously providing safeguards to ensure needy children in Ohio are receiving the nourishment these cards were designed to provide.

I apologize that my schedule did not allow me to appear before you today, but It has been my honor to provide proponent testimony to this committee and I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to advocate on behalf of this important piece of legislation. I want to thank Senator Tim Schaffer and the members of this committee for inviting me to do so.



Dennis J. Lowe, Commander

Major Crimes Unit