

Testimony in support of House Bill 462
Joint Police Districts
Before the House Local Government Committee
Respectfully submitted by: Sgt. Michael S. Balash of the Magnolia Police
Department
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Representative Hagan and Committee Members,

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to provide testimony in support of House Bill 462. It's an honor to represent the Magnolia Police Department along with the community I serve and reside in.

The Sandy Valley community falls within three Ohio counties: Carroll, Stark and Tuscarawas. Within the three counties, four townships and three villages are served by the Sandy Valley School District, from which we derive our present sense of community. Our local government is no stranger to consolidated services for the benefit of our residents. Our school system consolidated to one campus in approximately 2010. Quad Ambulance District formed to serve four municipalities while Tri-Division Ambulance District formed to serve three municipalities. The recently created Mohawk Valley Fire District was the consolidation of Sandy Township and Waynesburg fire departments. Each of the public safety agencies have levies supporting their operations.

The Ohio Revised Code allows municipalities to contract with one another for police services. Our agency funding comes from one (Village of Magnolia) levy that generates less than \$30,000 per year, tipping fees from a local landfill, and general fund dollars. During the last decade, our budget has consistently decreased, while demand for services has increased.

The Magnolia Police Department was leading the way decades ago, before government consolidation was in vogue. Officials in the Village of East Sparta (Population of 968) came to the realization that they couldn't maintain their own police force. They decided to contract with the Village of Magnolia for police services. Sandy Township Officials in Stark County (Population of 2,059) wanted an increased police presence, so they followed suit and also contracted with the Village of Magnolia for police services.

Currently, the Magnolia Police Department is the primary law enforcement agency for an approximately 23-square mile region. We employ two full-time

officers, eight part-time officers, and three unpaid auxiliary officers. Our community has fewer than 5,000 residents, but we have portions of seven state routes that account more than 36,000 motorists daily. Our 2016 agency budget is expected to be less than \$200,000. This budget accounts for labor, liability insurance, equipment, and fuel. The Magnolia Police Department is no longer able to provide 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week police protection. The budget shortage means some shifts are covered "on-call," meaning that a local officer, responds only if dispatched, only to crimes of violence.

Currently, Ohio Revised Code 505.482 restricts our three communities in the Sandy Valley area from enjoying the benefits of a police district. The Village of East Sparta is not contiguous with The Village of Magnolia or Sandy Township. The approximate three miles that separate our geographical borders means we can't put a consolidated levy before the voters that represents a millage that is fair for everyone. The inability to form a police district restricts our ability to compete for grants based on population and median income. It weakens our purchasing power and forces us to spend money on duplication of services.

Once, our community was reminiscent of the town of Mayberry as featured on the Andy Griffith Show set in the 1960's. That has changed. Our agency is doing its best to adapt. With the drug epidemic, some of our traffic crashes have become more serious. We're investing more time investigating drug trafficking, burglary, and sexual assault cases. We've experienced arson related to the drug trade. On the day that I wrote this testimony, I was called to assist one of my officers, who stopped a woman with a warrant for theft and aggravated vehicular assault. In the car we found a spoon with suspected heroin residue and a cut straw with powder that she admits will test positive for cocaine. The defendant also admitted she was on her way to buy Suboxone pills from a drug dealer.

We're not strangers to the increase in opiate overdoses. Recently, one of our officers responded to a double overdose in a convenience store parking lot. One person wasn't breathing, the other person was breathing, but appeared to be aspirating. Between our officer and the local EMTs, both drug users are alive. As the officer tried to ascertain their identities, he described them and the vehicle they were found in, to me. I figured out that one of the overdose victims was a neighbor. The other overdose victim recently lost a loved one close to him and felt comfortable enough to seek me out for help.

We also responded to a domestic situation between mother and son. When officers arrived, the suspect fled through a window. I interviewed the defendant's girlfriend. From my training and experiences, it was immediately obvious to me that she was abusing opiates. She told me where to recover her used syringes. That led to the discovery of other drugs containing Fentanyl. She would lose

consciousness in our custody, but it wasn't just a drug overdose. She had chest trauma in her heart region that wasn't visible until her clothes were cut off. That trauma and the drugs were obtained in Canton. We're just 13 miles from the City of Canton that qualified for and received the DOJ Cops Hiring Program, which targets gun violence, homeland security, and trust building. We've qualified for some equipment grants, but we've never qualified for a labor grant.

Statewide, I don't think we're alone. That's why we've asked for the law to become less restrictive. We think any two municipalities with legislative authority should have the option to consolidate law-enforcement resources. I suspect there are small - and perhaps large - communities statewide struggling with funding for police services. In some cases, the merging of two municipal police forces may mean the elimination of supervisory positions, but will certainly create more funding for boots-on-the-ground employees. For some communities, it might be the difference between survival or disbanding an agency all together. I've always been a part-time, rural police officer. I started my career in the Village of Malvern. That community was unable to support its police department and ceased operation 10 years ago. With the heroin epidemic facing our community today, I do not wish the same fate upon the Sandy Valley Community.

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