

Chair Eklund, Vice-Chair Manning, Ranking Member Thomas, and Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on Senate Bill 118. This legislation is aimed at helping one of the most overlooked and most victimized participants in athletics—the official.

It's common for an official to be the target of verbal harassment from players, coaches, and all too often, the spectators. Unfortunately, physical assault is a growing trend that we hope to prevent from also becoming common.

I began my position as Director of Officials with the Ohio High School Athletic Association in 2012. For the first five years in this role, we had zero reported instances of physical contact against an official. In the year and a half since, we've had 10 reported incidents, some of which did result in assault charges being filed.

10 incidents may seem a small number given the thousands of games that occur each year, but from a growth perspective, it is a trend that is alarming. This is part of a larger issue with sportsmanship that the OHSAA is addressing. Ejections are on the rise. Sportsmanship issues at games have risen 140% over the last 6 years. And these are just the incidents that are reported. As you all know from your time working in criminal justice matters, not all incidents get reported.

This legislation will help spotlight that this type of behavior is not acceptable. Officials should be shown the same decency and respect as others in the educational environment who receive extra protection, such as teachers, administrators, and bus drivers. 21 other states already have this type of legislation, and Ohio would be a welcome addition to them. Protecting officials in Ohio is protecting athletic opportunities for the youth in Ohio, who are at risk of having their games cancelled due to a shortage of officials, through no fault of their own.

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