



**Representative Joe Miller, 56th Ohio House District
House Criminal Justice Committee – HB 44 Testimony
March 11th, 2021**

Good morning Chair LaRe, Vice Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Leland and Members of the committee for the opportunity to speak in support of House Bill 44, which passed this committee 10-1 and the House in a bipartisan fashion by a vote of 74-13 during the 133rd General Assembly.

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 football officials, soccer referees, baseball umpires, and everything in between.

This is a topic that is close to my heart. I am currently in my 21st year as a basketball referee, and also have past experience officiating other sports as well. In addition, I have served in the roles of a coach, a parent watching in the stands, and as a student athlete myself. With this, I can draw from the different vantage points competition provides, and understand the tremendous benefits of playing sports. That is why it is imperative for us to maintain a safe and welcoming environment for everyone involved.

As my joint sponsor discussed, HB 44 brings the penalty for assaulting a sports official closer in line to the same protection afforded to bus drivers, 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 assault.

Why are so many states around the country taking action on this issue; because this issue impacts all demographics -- as many of our officials who have asked for this protection are both male & female, white, brown & black, and come from both rural areas as well as the inner city. But 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 leaving.*

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 44 sends an unmistakable message that we will not tolerate the assault of sports officials. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and my joint sponsor and I would be glad to field any questions.