

Chairman LaRe, Vice Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Leland, and members of the House Criminal Justice Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. The bill under consideration is one that passed this committee in the prior session with bipartisan support, and it passed a vote in the full house with bipartisan support as well. It is our hope that the same thing will happen in this session and that we can make this bill a law.

Assaults on officials have been on the rise. I began my role at the Ohio High School Athletic Association in 2012. We had zero reported instances of physical abuse against an official in the first five years on my tenure. Since that time, we have had 19 reported instances, including two in this spectator-limited season.

This may seem like a small number given the thousands of games that occur every year, but the trend is alarming. What is disturbing is that often times the perpetrators are not showing remorse for their actions. There was an incident this year in southeast Ohio in which a basketball official was assaulted and received death threats on the court after the game. The two perpetrators involved were banned from attending OHSAA tournament games due to their behavior, which was captured on video. When informed of this ban, the individuals threatened to sue the OHSAA and stated that their behavior, and I quote, "was allowed" because the official was "terrible."

The lack of respect for officials is at an all-time high. Perfection is the perceived standard, and if you do not meet it, ridicule, harassment and even assault are the consequences. This legislation will help spotlight that this type of behavior is not acceptable. Teachers, administrators and bus drivers receive this type of additional protection through legislation. Officials should be shown the same decency and respect. At least 22 other states already have legislation like this on the books, and Ohio would be a welcome addition to them. Protecting officials in Ohio is protecting athletic opportunities for the youth in Ohio. The National Association of Sports Officials did a study several years ago in which it surveyed several thousand officials nationally. The number one reason people left officiating was due to abuse. We do not want game opportunities for our youth in Ohio canceled due to a shortage of officials.

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