

Chairman Manning, Vice Chair McColley, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the Senate Judicial 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 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.

Unfortunately, assaults on officials have been on the rise. I began my role as the Director of Officiating at the Ohio High School Athletic Association in 2012. In the first 5 years on my tenure, we had zero reported instances of physical abuse against an official. Since that time, however, we are averaging 8-10 per year.

What is disturbing, is that often the perpetrators are showing no 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." In the not-so-distant past, fans would never walk on to the court in basketball. Now, especially below the varsity level, fans walk right onto the court to confront officials. Officials routinely receive verbal abuse while walking to their vehicles after contests.

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 already receive this type of additional protection through legislation. We are hopeful that officials will be shown the same courtesy and respect. At least 22 other states already have legislation like this on the books, and Ohio would be a welcome addition to the group. Protecting officials in Ohio is protecting athletic opportunities for the youth in Ohio. The shortage of officials in all states is a big concern. Ohio lost almost 10% of our officiating numbers during the height of the COVID pandemic. Many have not returned. The #1 reason for not returning is also the #1 reason people don't want to become officials: safety. 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 today. I would be happy to answer any question the committee may have.