



POLICE DEPARTMENT

CITY OF TALLMADGE

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House Civil Justice Committee
Proponent Testimony on Ohio HB 249
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Chair Pavliga, Vice Chair White, Ranking Member Brewer and members of the House Behavioral Health Committee, thank you for this opportunity to submit proponent testimony for House Bill 249.

My name is Ralph Stover. I am a patrol sergeant for the City of Tallmadge Police Department and the Summit County Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) Coordinator for law enforcement. As the CIT Coordinator for Summit County, I work to bridge the gap between the law enforcement and mental health agencies in our county.

When I began my career in law enforcement, I had no idea how often I would cross paths with individuals struggling with mental illness. As I progressed throughout my career, I developed a passion for individuals living with mental health and wanted to find a way to better serve them.

It is probably common knowledge that police officers often deal with the same people multiple times in their community. As we deal with an individual struggling with mental illness, we learn more about them after each incident. Officers begin to learn their stories, their behaviors when in crisis, and their diagnoses. We also have a pretty good idea of what their baseline is when mentally stable.

When an individual's mental health begins to deteriorate, a family member typically reach out to us for assistance, often requesting a welfare check. In many cases, officers will quickly realize that the individual's mental health is declining but determine that the person is not yet dangerous enough to warrant emergency hospitalization. Officers can usually see the "writing on the wall" and know that the individual is a few days away from being in major crisis but we are left with no choice than to tell the family to call back when their loved one gets worse. House Bill 249 would prevent situations like this from happening. With the added fifth criterion, officers would be able to act sooner and get the individual an emergency examination before they are in a major crisis.

I would like to share a personal example where House Bill 249 would have been very helpful. For privacy purposes, I will refer to the individual as Mr. Jones.

My department had been involved with Mr. Jones for many years. He was diagnosed with schizophrenia and several other mental health disorders. His family was very involved and would often call our department to conduct welfare checks. Mr. Jones lived alone and had a long history of

being non-compliant with his medication and mental health treatment. He often told officers that he stopped taking his medication because he was allergic to it. Due to the frequent contacts our department had with him; we were able to notice a particular pattern in his behaviors.

Mr. Jones was very delusional, but as his condition worsened, his delusions evolved. He was often convinced that the police were demons and were trying to kill him. He hoarded knives and stashed them throughout his house. As the delusions worsened, it was a good indicator that a crisis was looming. When Mr. Jones went into crisis mode, he became very violent and would create situations that were dangerous to himself, the public, and officers at the scene. By the time it got to this point, it was not possible to deescalate him and use of force would become necessary.

On one such occasion, officers were notified by his family that Mr. Jones was not compliant with his treatment and medication and that they were concerned for his welfare. Officers checked on him and saw that his mental health was declining but it was not severe enough that they could justify taking action at that time.

Several days later, officers were notified again by family that Mr. Jones was threatening to kill himself. They said he was screaming and clearly not in control of his behavior. When we arrived at the residence, he refused to answer the door but communicated to us through the front bay window. As we tried to calm him down, we saw through the window that he was becoming more and more irate and started destroying things. The situation was pure chaos. He appeared to be fighting things that we could not see. In fact, he was so delusional, that he called 911 and asked the dispatcher to send the Tallmadge Police.

As the situation progressed, Mr. Jones brandished a knife and threatened to harm officers. We eventually had to force entry into the home. Attempts to communicate with him were unsuccessful. He threw things at us and was very violent and hostile. Unfortunately, he had to be tased and handcuffed. After we gained control of the situation, Mr. Jones still thought we were demons.

As crisis incidents with Mr. Jones became more and more frequent, he became progressively more dangerous. He began running out into the community under belief that he was fleeing from demons or the FBI. He would try to enter random homes and on one occasion he gained entry to a pizza shop and caused a significant amount of damage to the business.

Under current law, officers are not able to intervene until Mr. Jones is in full blown crisis which puts many people, including himself, at risk. If H.B. 249 becomes law, it will enable officers to intervene before he becomes a danger to himself or others.

House Bill 249 would give officers another tool in our toolbox to better serve the community. In our community, and in many like ours, law enforcement know the individual's history and we know when they are experiencing psychiatric deterioration. We should not have to walk away and wait for the situation to become dangerous before we can step in and get them help. It is not fair to the person, their family, or to first responders.

I urge you to pass House Bill 249 and allow Ohio to join the twenty-four other states that already have psychiatric deterioration language in their statute.