

June 6, 2023

To whom it may concern,

I unequivocally support H.B. 139 to increase assault penalties if the victim is a sports official as introduced by Rep Roemer and Rep Miller.

As an official in baseball, basketball, and soccer since 1997, I have worked NCAA, OHSAA, independent professional, and every other amateur level of contests out there. This includes post-season assignments including multiple OHSAA State Championships, the Christian College World Series, and others. I also serve as a Clinician, Evaluator, and Assigner in this wonderful field. I bring that experience to this testimony to implore the severe need for this bill.

The world of amateur sports has changed in many ways in the last decade and not always for the better. While opportunities for athletes have grown in a positive way, this has led to a saturation in the number of teams, programs, and events - all of which need officials. This already taxes the number of officials available for games, as that number has declined in recent years. The National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) reports more than 33,000 officials have left the avocation since 2020. While the pandemic was certainly a contributing factor, the reality is that poor behavior by players, coaches, and fans remains a top reason as reported in numerous data points by the NFHS, NCAA, and Referee Magazine (the leading publication in our industry).

Moreover, the severity of incidents involving game personnel continues to become more concerning. To be yelled at on the field and end it there is something which has existed for years. I could not count the number of things yelled at me in my career.

But where those things ended after the next pitch, shot, or pass in years past - they now fester and exponentially increase in scope. Officials are followed to their cars, harassed, and even threatened with bodily harm and death. Just last weekend we had officials threatened with a gun and the police involved. This behavior occurs by all personnel and is patently unacceptable. It must end now. This bill will increase penalties in a necessary way.

I also have coached many sports over the years from youth to high school and have removed my own players' family members for how officials are treated. No livelihoods are lost on the fields and courts of Ohio Youth sports. This is an enjoyable hobby manifesting the best in competition but the worst in treatment of others. Disagreeing with a call is not something to be argued and dangerously acted upon; rather, it should teach character and dealing with adversity.

This bill makes sense for Ohio sports officials and would join the laws of many other states who have already taken action to protect those who work contests to provide opportunities for our young people.

Thank you for your time.

Respectfully,



Christopher Prokes, Ph.D.
Sports Official, Assigner, Clinician, and Evaluator
Dayton, Ohio