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Chair Abrams, Vice Chair Williams, Ranking Member Brown, and members of the Ohio House Criminal Justice Committee. My name is Jeff Dieringer, and I am with SEIU District 1199 WV/KY/OH. Our union proudly represents the over 590 parole officers who serve in all 88 counties across Ohio, keeping our communities safe and ensuring offenders are properly supervised and rehabilitated to become productive members of society.

It is no secret that parole officers are facing recruitment and retention issues across the country. Parole officers are often forgotten as law enforcement, despite every single person they supervise being a convicted criminal and referenced as law enforcement under the Ohio Revised Code. The passage of HB 441 is crucial in addressing these recruitment and retention issues. This bill will move Parole Officers into the Law Enforcement Division of OPERS, providing the same retirement benefits as other law enforcement. It will also hard cap caseloads at 50 offenders per officer, a significant step towards improving their working conditions

Two of the primary reasons parole officers want to leave the field are high caseloads and the service length required to achieve full retirement. Officers starting today would need to serve at least 32 years to achieve full benefits under OPERS, compared to Law Enforcement only needing to serve 25 years. Parole Officers are dealing with similar physical and mental demands as other law enforcement and deserve the same benefits. Parole officers are dealing with caseloads of upwards of 100 offenders at one time, including an increased share of high-risk offenders. This leads to significant burnout, and offenders can't possibly be correctly supervised and rehabilitated. HB 441 will provide reasons for officers to not only want to work in parole but also stay in parole and make it a career.

Right now, the current parole vacancy rate is around 7.5%, while the average time a parole job remains vacant is a little over 1 year. According to the State, 131 officers will be eligible to retire within the next 5 years. It is also important to note the changes made to judicial release and the increase in maximum earned credits under SB 288 from the 134th General Assembly that is expected to increase the number of offenders under supervision released from prison. There are currently not, and will not be in the future, enough officers to properly supervise offenders.

HB 441 is a public safety bill at its core. When there aren't enough officers to supervise offenders properly, Ohioans and their communities will suffer. These brave men and women put their lives on the line every day to protect Ohioans, and it is about time we gave them the respect and dignity they deserve. We must pass HB 441 swiftly for the sake of these officers, their loved ones, and our communities.