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Sponsor Testimony on H.B. 261(EMS Workers) – Pensions Committee
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Chairman Mathews, Vice Chair King, Ranking Member Lightbody, and members of the Ohio House Pensions Committee – thank you for the opportunity to testify on House Bill 261. This legislation aims to make emergency medical services workers labeled as “public safety officers” under the Ohio Public Employees Retirement System.

I have worked in EMS for the last five years, first as an EMT and subsequently with continued training and skills as a paramedic. Prior to working in EMS, I completed a master’s degree and worked several jobs in public and nonprofit sector administration. I don’t tell you that to bore you with facts about myself, but to demonstrate that I have seen two facets of the public sector- the administrative side of public service, and the public safety side. I can say unequivocally that single role- EMT’s and paramedics should be placed correctly in the sphere of public safety officers under OPERS. There are a myriad of ways in which single role paramedic and EMT’s are more closely aligned with the work done by police officers and fire fighters than they are aligned with the work done by most public servants. Both the physical and mental toll of EMS is in a completely different sphere.

If you will, let me give a sample of what demands EMS workers face, from my own experience:

-I have climbed through windows, up hills, up and down stairs, to reach patients. I have wedged myself into spaces smaller than I belonged to access people, and I have routinely lifted persons two to three times my body weight. I have pulled patients out of slippery bathtubs, off and from behind toilets, through attic entrances and out of vehicles. I have skirted downed, live power lines, and broken glass. I have walked through and around moving traffic, on freeways and on side streets, often between lanes, in low light, rain and snow.

- I have provided CPR to infants, and occluded gunshot wounds on children, and comforted distraught parents.

- I have recognized signs of physical abuse of infant and child abuse, and been summoned to court for criminal proceedings following.

- I have been confronted with knives and guns, and at times had to secure weapons away from patients prior to the arrival of police to ensure an altered patient could not turn those weapons on myself or my partner.

- I have cared for patients who are violent due to causes that use of force cannot control, such as hypoxic brain injury, drug-induced psychosis, mental illness, low blood sugar and other medical causes. I have dodged fists and been spit at, as police looked on, unable to restrain combative patients due to these medical causes.

As you can see, these are completely different from the job demands of most workers who are required to complete 32 years of service prior to retirement. All these things are routine for myself and my co-workers. While single-role EMT’s are advised to ensure whatever they’re walking into is “safe” prior to entering, that is not always possible. Additionally, “safe” and “simple” are not the same, and there is no guarantee about what any given situation will require

mentally or physically. I hope this short list helps to illuminate what EMT's and medics face, and make it clear why this workload is too high for many bodies and brains to endure for the currently-required 32 years.

Currently, single-role paramedics and EMT's are not classified as "public safety officers" under OPERS. I believe this erroneous classification is largely due to the history of EMS services in Ohio. The early consolidation of police and fire pension services accurately reflected all the "public safety" officers—because EMS as a separate service did not yet exist. In 1967, when hundreds of pension systems in Ohio were consolidated into the Ohio Police and Fire Pension Systemⁱ, police and fire did it all. This is a full decade prior to EMS being established as a third service in Cleveland. OPERS itself, as the website proudly states to the public, added a Law Enforcement Division in 1975ⁱⁱ. This is the same year EMS was establishedⁱⁱⁱ-- too early for the impact of single-role EMTs to be felt. As society realized that medical advances meant there were better ways to care for sick and injured people than by throwing them into hearses or the back of police vehicles, a third service emerged. Over the years, this service has grown, and we are now a full branch with clearly defined roles for protecting and serving the public. However, the relative youth of EMS as a has allowed for the creation of an exclusionary classification in legislation, which today you are being presented with the opportunity to fix.

If you ask the public in Cleveland, EMS providers are unquestionably seen as public safety officers—so much so that we often must clarify to patients that we are not police. People expect we will be there in time of need. When we are understaffed, news stories hinge on the fact that a public good is being withheld if an ambulance takes too long to arrive. The default workings of the city itself demonstrate we belong in the category of public safety officers-- we serve under the public safety director; we receive a badge, and we are sworn in in front of the mayor. By aligning our retirement into public safety, this body will be aligning the expectation of the public into the realities of those proving care. By allowing EMS personnel to retire at 25 years of service, you will be painting fresh lines on the road created years ago, before EMS existed as a separate service, when "police and fire" served as an umbrella term for those who filled all public safety roles. Re-classifying EMS in this small but important legal sense will close an exclusionary loophole of that the original classification was likely not designed to create. We are here asking for a correction of that error, so that the hard physical and mental labor we do in the interest of public safety is recognized for what it is.

ⁱ "About Us". Oho Police and Fire Pension Fund. <https://www.op-f.org/information/aboutopf>. Accessed Oct. 10th, 2023.

ⁱⁱ "A Brief History of OPERS". Ohio Public Employees Retirement System. <https://www.opers.org/about/timeline/index.html>. Accessed Oct. 10th, 2023.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Cleveland EMS History". CARE Local 1975. <https://www.care1975.com/history/>. Accessed Oct. 10th, 2023.