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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 publicly employed emergency medical service workers labeled as “public safety officers” under the Ohio Public Employees Retirement System.

Working as an EMT or Paramedic is a demanding job which requires specialized training and advocacy for people in need. We are called to chaotic situations where we often encounter patients and their families at their most vulnerable and in need of immediate help. In addition, these scenes can contain hazards such as traffic on a busy highway, severe weather conditions, exposure to communicable diseases, and/or combative patients. Despite these conditions, EMS workers through dedication to the job and compassion for people, show up for work and provide essential medical care.

As healthcare evolves, so do the hazards. Ballistic vests are a standard part of our protective equipment which must always be with us. Last year I received training for how to operate in tandem with police as part of the medical rescue team in the event of an active shooter. This training was done with the understanding that it was not in case an incident happens, but for when an incident happens.

As part of the initial physical requirements, all cadets must be able to deadlift a minimum of 150 pounds. The cot which is used on a daily basis to load a patient safely into an ambulance weighs 125 pounds without a patient. With the current call volume, a crew can be expected to have 8-12 calls on average in a shift. Which means lifting 250+ pounds multiple times per shift. That is just loading and unloading the patient from the truck in addition to other physical activities like carrying a patient down several flights of stairs, lifting people off the floor or out of the bathtub, or up and out of a basement. As you might imagine, this all puts an enormous physical strain on the body.

Currently all publicly employed EMTs and Paramedics who work for organizations that are not part of a Fire department must complete 32 years of service to be eligible for an unreduced pension. Police and Fire enjoy a 25 year unreduced pension. Often EMTs and Paramedics are unable to complete the additional 7 years of service and either leave with a significantly reduced pension or go out on disability due to the cumulative effect of injuries sustained during their career.

In meetings, our members have expressed that they are willing to commit to increased monetary contributions to reduce their service years. In response to a comment that the change in pension may reduce the needed years of service, one member said, "if it will shave off 2 weeks, do it." In addition, the initial response from city council has been very positive.

Retention has been a huge concern in recent years, but so has recruiting. Imagine a person attending a job fair in Cleveland where Police, Fire, and EMS fact sheets are lined up in a row. A prospective employee would look at salary, hours, and benefits. But EMS recruiters have said that when they see that the pension requires 32 years for EMS vs 25 years for Police and Fire, they have a near impossible task convincing people to sign up. Even if the prospective employee is not interested in a career, it often acts as a deterrent. For those that do sign up, as an organization we are humbled by their dedication. But eliminating that barrier is crucial to replenishing our numbers in order to continue to provide quality service to the citizens that we serve.

In 2021, the city was often able to staff 25 ambulances during the day and 21 at night. In 2022, the city is only able to staff 21 ambulances during the day and 19 at night. This is the direct result of recruiting challenges.

House Bill 261 will give the third service publicly employed EMTs/Paramedics and their employers an opportunity to invest in their future. In addition to retaining the personnel we currently have; it will serve as a vital recruiting tool for future employees.