Ohio State Highway Patrol
Testimony of Colonel Charles Jones
Operating Budget Bill
House Finance Subcommittee on Public Safety
March 7, 2023

Chairman Miller, Ranking Minority Member Miller and Members of the House Finance Subcommittee on Public Safety: I am Colonel Charles Jones, superintendent of the Ohio State Highway Patrol. It is an honor to appear before you today to testify on House Bill 33 for the budget on behalf of the Ohio State Highway Patrol.

When I was named superintendent last August, I pledged that our personnel will continue to deliver professional public safety services with a purpose.

Much like Governor DeWine's priorities for the Patrol as outlined in this budget, our mission is to protect life and property through the core services we provide. We are addressing the threats we know Ohioans are most concerned about – impaired driving, drug interdiction, distracted driving and highway crime.

Much of what we do starts with working to keep Ohio roadways safe. Ohio State Troopers average one million motorist contacts every year. And it may surprise you to learn that more than half of those motorist contacts are non-enforcement stops.

That is not to say we don't emphasize enforcement. In fact, the Patrol has a detailed data and analytics strategy to specifically address traffic crash patterns and dangerous driving behaviors that directly impact motorists in Ohio. We collect statewide crash data, and enforcement and other traffic safety metrics, to develop and implement a strategic, data-driven approach to traffic safety.

In the past two years, that approach led to state troopers arresting more than 33,000 impaired drivers, more than 66,000 aggressive driving enforcement actions and more than 132,000 safety belt violations.

Despite those efforts, Ohio still saw 1,356 traffic fatalities in 2021 and based on provisional data, another 1,273 traffic fatalities last year.

The Ohio Investigative Unit conducts trace-back investigations when adults ages 21 and over are involved in a fatal or serious injury vehicle crash and are suspected of consuming alcohol or drugs at a permit premises or other location in violation of the law. Additionally, a trace-back can be conducted for any intoxicated person under the age of 21 found in an arrest situation or involved in a fatal or serious injury vehicle crash regardless if it was at a permit premise or private party. These trace-back investigations are another tool for law enforcement to use when investigating crashes or other incidents involving underage alcohol consumption or someone who may have been over-served. Last year, OIU agents conducted 160 trace-back investigations. There were 30 violation notices that were issued as a result of the investigations.

Ohio Investigative Unit agents also engage in educational outreach efforts, including the Alcohol Server Knowledge program, known by its acronym ASK. This program educates people involved in the sale and handling of alcohol on the rules and regulations that govern liquor permits, with emphasis on not over-serving patrons and keeping alcohol out of the hands of underage persons.

Another educational program I want to highlight is the Patrol's DRIVE to Live Program, which was created to emphasize safety messages to our youth on a variety of topics through structured group settings and a conversational format. DRIVE is an acronym for Decisions, Responsibility, Invest, Value and Educate. In the 2021-2022 School Year, the Patrol conducted 154 events that positively impacted 15,499 youth.

I am confident further strides in traffic safety will be realized this year, and in the years to come. And those strides will be tied directly to the assistance provided from the General Assembly in the last session in passing the distracted driving legislation. The new law will help achieve our mutual goals of increasing safety on our roads and is providing law enforcement officers with the tools to help change driving behavior, saving countless lives on Ohio's roadways.

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Traffic enforcement and motorist contacts often serve as our gateway to impacting violent crime. Along with Ohio Investigative Unit agents, we frequently invest resources in collaboration with law enforcement and community partners across the state.

These pro-active efforts, driven by local needs and supported through detailed statistics, have strengthened relationships, positively affected crime rates and overall traffic safety, and provided our citizens with peace of mind.

I would like to give you a few examples.

A three-day collaborative initiative in Cleveland with the City of Cleveland, and Cleveland Division of Police resulted in the seizure of 46 illegal firearms, recovery of four stolen vehicles and the initiation of 13 felony drug cases. This initiative focused on the city's 4th and 5th districts, which have shown the highest number of calls reporting violent crime. A number of Patrol resources were utilized to include Cleveland District troopers, Aviation, Investigative Services and the Ohio Investigative Unit in partnership with the Cleveland Division of Police's Violent Crime Reduction Team.

That enforcement detail was one of several saturation events coordinated in partnership with the Governor's office. In 2021, Governor DeWine directed the Ohio Department of Public Safety and the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction to provide resources to local agencies for these multi-agency operations upon request by local officials.

Over the past two years, our Aviation section conducted 14 joint missions with the Cincinnati Police Department, BCI and the DEA in Hamilton County. Those collaborative endeavors resulted in the seizures of firearms, illegal drugs and felony apprehensions in the city of Cincinnati.

Last year we worked with the Youngstown Police Department providing extra patrols in areas of the city known for high crime rates. In 2021, I am proud to say that after one of the most violent years in Youngtown since the 1990s, the city of Youngstown saw a dramatic decrease in violence during 2022.

That marked our second consecutive year assisting our partners in Youngstown. In late 2021, we joined law enforcement partners to saturate areas throughout the city of Youngstown as a response to rising crime and gun violence over the previous year. Through the use of saturation patrols, teams of officers targeted high crime areas, while using traffic stops to continue the positive messaging of traffic safety.

Last summer we joined law enforcement partners at the request of the Toledo Police Department on an initiative born of timely, local intelligence. Officers learned of a "takeover" in the city of Toledo, planned to disrupt traffic safety and police operations through the use of high-performance vehicles operating in a reckless manner at certain locations during designated time frames. As a result of a strong law enforcement presence, including Patrol Aviation assets, takeover participants were deterred from gathering. Additionally, officers removed four impaired drivers and seized an illegal firearm.

I am proud of our efforts to reduce violent crime. In the past two years, state troopers made nearly 12,000 felony arrests and registered nearly 2,600 drug violations.

And, as many law enforcement agencies are seeing an increase in gun seizures, they have doubled for the Ohio Investigative Unit every year since 2019 when 24 guns were seized. OIU Agents recovered 276 guns in 2022, which equates to nearly 5 guns per enforcement agent for the year.

Recently on January 20, a trooper stopped a Texas registered Dodge Ram 1500 for a speed violation on Interstate 70, in Madison County. After a K-9 alerted to the vehicle, a search revealed several boxes of firearms in the bed of the truck. There were 4 AK-47's, 4 shotguns, 7 AR-15's, and 31 pistols. The guns were packaged in boxes and covered in foil enroute to cross the Mexico border.

A passenger in the vehicle, who claimed possession of the firearms, was discovered to be in the country illegally and was in violation of federal firearm regulations. We worked collaboratively with agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, and Homeland Security Investigations. Ultimately, the ATF adopted the case and took possession of all evidence, while the passenger was released to the custody of HSI.

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Our successes in contributing to crime reduction stems from a strategic decision the Patrol made more than a decade ago to elevate criminal patrol to the same mission level as highway safety. We continue to set records for drug interdiction because Ohio State troopers continue to look beyond the initial reason for the traffic stop and engage to make a difference with every contact they make.

Just last year, troopers removed more than 400 pounds of Fentanyl, 600 pounds of Cocaine and nearly 8,000 pounds of Marijuana from our communities.

Moreover, more than 17,000 opiate pills and 1,500 firearms were taken off our roadways.

Several of our illegal drug seizures last year were among the largest in the Patrol's history. I want to recap three of our record-breaking significant seizures just from this past year.

Last November, a Trooper stopped a vehicle on Interstate 70 for a following too close violation. Our canine alerted to the vehicle, and the search using a handheld x-ray machine revealed 220.5 pounds of cocaine hidden inside wooden boards in the cargo area of the vehicle. This stop is the 6th largest cocaine seizure in our history.

Last May, a Trooper had a consensual contact with a commercial car hauler in a rest area on Interstate 70. A consent search revealed 97 pounds of methamphetamine. This stop is the 3rd largest methamphetamine seizure in our history.

And last June, a Trooper stopped a vehicle on Interstate 70 for marked lanes violations. Our canine alerted to the vehicle, and a search revealed 97 pounds of fentanyl. This is the largest fentanyl seizure in Patrol history.

It was also a textbook example of collaboration and involved a multi-jurisdictional local and federal partnership between the Patrol, Ohio Narcotics Intelligence Center, DEA, and the Springfield Police Department.

To place this seizure into context: A two milligram dose of fentanyl is potentially fatal.

Therefore, if you extrapolate the fatal dose amounts on a pound of fentanyl – that one traffic stop potentially saved 22 million lives.

Let me say that again – Saved 22 million lives.

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We are also able to utilize traffic enforcement to make an impact on human trafficking occurring in Ohio. January was Human Trafficking Awareness Month and throughout the month our commercial vehicle enforcement personnel were out all around the state bringing awareness to this critical subject. And, our state troopers and Ohio Investigative Unit Agents were working diligently each day to interdict human traffickers and free those victims who have been held within its grip.

And we know, trafficking is happening all around us. Fortunately, we have been in a position to make a difference to stop some of these crimes and rescue innocent victims.

As an example, last October on the Ohio Turnpike in Sandusky County, troopers were dispatched to a service plaza for a welfare check of a female who was a passenger in a commercial vehicle. The vehicle was located and a consensual encounter was made with the suspect and female victim, who reported being abducted by the suspect in another state and sexually assaulted. The suspect in this case was charged with felonies of human trafficking and abduction.

Also, early last year a Ravenna man was sentenced in the U.S. Northern District Court of Ohio to 14 years in federal prison for sex trafficking a young female. He was arrested twice in 2019 by an OIU agent working with the Mahoning Valley Human Trafficking Task Force. The male was first arrested during a May 2019 sting after he attempted to have sex with a 15-year-old girl. While out on bond for that case, he then attempted to have sex with a 12-year-old girl in November. A search warrant was obtained for his phone, and a conversation was discovered where he had paid the female juvenile in the Cleveland area for sex, also while out on bond for the May 2019 case. A joint investigation with the Cuyahoga Regional Human Trafficking Task Force resulted in charges being filed in federal court.

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Collaboration with our local partners happens in many other ways as well.

Our Members Assistance Team, known by the acronym MAT, is a resource available to all of our employees, and those from any Ohio law enforcement agency, who have experienced a critical incident, emotional event, cumulative stress or mental health issues. All members of the MAT team are required to attend peer training provided by the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, which gives them the right to privileged conversations under Ohio law. In the past two years, our MAT members assisted 43 outside agencies with critical incidents.

We have a similar program specifically designed to support our active and retired military service members – and two citizens were assisted by that group last year.

I'm sure some of you are familiar with Ohio ASSIST. On a quarterly basis, we host a 3 ½ day "Post Critical Incident Seminar," available to all first responders, with the goal to help them cope with the aftermath of traumatic or critical incidents. Ohio ASSIST provides training at no cost for agencies and groups across the state.

In the past two years, we conducted eight Ohio ASSIST seminars. Here's a number we are very proud of – in those seminars, 224 first responders and support individuals participated, including best friends, family members and spouses.

Now, I would like to talk about our Aviation section. Nearly 70% of our Aviation missions last year came from other agencies, accounting for 675 requests. Last year, our Aviation section collaborated with the Dayton Police Department for 30 proactive enforcement details. You should also know that last year a record 230 people were located by our flight crews, many of whom would not have been located otherwise.

In Cincinnati, troopers collaborated with local law enforcement over the past two years in a variety of ways including the USA versus Mexico soccer match, every Bengals home game, dignitary motorcades, including three 3 presidential details, monthly training with the Cincinnati Police Department's motorcycle unit, Riverfest and assistance on traffic flow detours during the four months that the Brent Spence Bridge was shut down due to fire.

Our Special Response Team, known by the acronym SRT, which is our version of SWAT, assisted 52 other agencies. SRT made 1,530 attempts on Arrest Warrants with 1,394 of those in conjunction with the United States Marshals Service Violent Fugitive Task Force last year. SRT has one full time unit assigned to United State Marshals Services offices in Cleveland, Youngstown, Dayton and Southeast Ohio. SRT also assists the Toledo, Mansfield, Cincinnati, Elyria, Columbus and Akron U.S. Marshals Service offices when requested and able to do so.

Our Crash Reconstruction Section initiated 505 reconstruction cases last year, and 124 were the result of outside agency requests. Overall, we assisted 79 outside agencies with their investigations. In addition to new cases, the Crash Reconstruction Section assisted with an informal training course for Marysville Police and held a basic crash investigation course for the Ashland County Sheriff's Office.

We also have 21 state troopers assigned to various task forces, collaborating with FBI Joint Terrorism Task Forces, the United States Marshals Service, the Drug Enforcement Agency and local crime and drug task forces.

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I want to shift and tell you about a few new, innovative things the Ohio State Highway Patrol is doing this year.

We have a strategic plan called Impact 23 that is our roadmap for how we are delivering effective public safety services throughout the year. Impact 23 incorporates Collaboration, Operations and Technology in ways where we will really make a difference in Ohio communities. Here are three examples.

First, each of our nine districts is fully integrating substance abuse referral services into their everyday impaired driving enforcement and Criminal Patrol operations. In Ohio, more than half of all fatal crashes each year involves an impaired driver. A recent analysis of Ohio State Highway Patrol arrest data revealed an annual 30% recidivism rate in impaired driving arrests. In 2023, we are working to mitigate recidivism by offering behavioral health referrals to everyone arrested for an impaired driving or other drug-related offense.

This referral project is unique because it attacks the problem on a statewide scale as opposed to looking at it as a local issue. We are not aware of any other state doing it this way. This is an example in which we are using modern day law enforcement tactics to solve problems that have existed for a long time. I would be remiss if I didn't thank local and state mental health and addiction services for their collaboration in this endeavor. I think it also shows how we are evolving as an industry – which is something the public should be happy we are doing. Ultimately, we believe this level of commitment will both reduce fatalities and the recidivism rate.

A second innovative strategy this year is our incorporation of the Handle with Care program, which is a trauma-informed, cross-systems, collaborative program aimed to ensure that children who are exposed to adverse events receive appropriate interventions and have opportunities to build resilience through positive relationships with teachers and first responders.

And third, human trafficking persists as a silent epidemic throughout the country. This terrible practice ruins lives while supporting other areas of crime including drug trafficking, weapons violations, child abuse, and innumerable other atrocities. The Ohio State Highway Patrol is bringing our full weight and resources to bear on this problem.

Chairman Miller, I would be happy to come back and give this sub-committee updates on these innovations early next year.

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Furthermore, in the introduced written budget language there are two items I want to touch on before I conclude.

The first pertains to the platooning of connected vehicles. For your background, this change was needed to expand autonomous vehicle testing in the state. The change defines "Connected Vehicles" and "Vehicle Platoons" and exempts from the distance/vision requirements of 300 feet which is found in Ohio Revised Code 4511.34(B)(3). This new language opens Ohio to being a competitive market in advancing vehicle technology without compromising safety.

The other item in this budget is the primary safety belt language. Every year in Ohio, more than half of the people killed in motor vehicle crashes are not wearing safety belts available to them at the time of the crash. Last year's safety belt compliance rate in Ohio was 80.8%. Much like the recently passed bill that made distracted driving a primary offense in Ohio, a primary safety belt law would undoubtably start saving lives on the first day it was law in Ohio.

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In closing, our core mission revolves around those types of critical safety and security areas where every day, across Ohio, state troopers, Ohio Investigative Unit agents, police officers and professional staff directly and positively impact and local communities.

We appreciate the support the General Assembly continues to show law enforcement and to the Ohio State Highway Patrol. Your support to police officers, sheriff deputies, Ohio Investigative Unit agents and state troopers matters and is appreciated by those on the front lines.

At every opportunity, the women and men of the Ohio State Highway Patrol and Ohio Investigative Unit provide Service with a Purpose in all 88 counties of this state.

As you undertake the important work of considering our budget, I know we have an even greater opportunities to make Ohio safer in the next biennium.

Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Miller, and Members of the House Finance Subcommittee on Public Safety, I again thank you for today's opportunity to testify on behalf of the Ohio State Highway Patrol.

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