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## Sponsor Testimony

Senate Bill 53

Ohio Senate Government Oversight Committee

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Thank you Vice-Chair Antani, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and Members of the Government Oversight Committee for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on S.B. 53. Senate Bill 53 changes the age at which one is able to become a police officer from 21 to 18 years old.

America is currently facing a shortage of police officers<sup>1</sup>, and Ohio is no stranger to this crisis<sup>2</sup>. While Governor DeWine recently increased compensation for members of the Ohio State Highway Patrol<sup>3</sup> and we raised the age at which one can become a State Trooper from 35 to 40 during the last General Assembly<sup>4</sup>, we need to take a closer look at what we can do to help other branches of law enforcement. According to Westerville Police Chief Robert Ware, “If we are short staffed, we're not in your neighborhood as much when you're asleep as we would like to be or as much as you would like us to be.”<sup>5</sup> Coupled with the fact that Ohio is experiencing its highest rate of violent crime in over a decade<sup>6</sup>, legislators should explore what additional steps we can take to help alleviate the strain on local precincts facing [recruiting](#) and [staffing shortages](#).

One way we can help is by expanding the pool of individuals eligible to become a police officer, through simply changing the words “twenty-one” to “eighteen” within the revised code. This change would permit all

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.foxnews.com/us/nine-cities-reached-record-homicides-2022-staffing-shortages-plague-police-departments>

<sup>2</sup> <https://fox8.com/news/i-team/any-help-ahead-for-finding-more-cleveland-police-officers/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://abc6onyourside.com/news/local/ohio-offering-pay-raises-and-recruitment-retention-bonuses-to-oshp-troopers-department-of-public-safety-administrative-services-gov-mike-dewine>

<sup>4</sup> <https://codes.ohio.gov/ohio-revised-code/section-5503.01/4-3-2023>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.10tv.com/article/news/local/central-ohio-police-departments-staffing-shortages/530-2d6659e3-057d-42e2-ad99-b9206f334a04>

<sup>6</sup> <https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/crime-trend>

communities to appoint police officers at age 18, freeing up three additional years of eligible candidates. It is important to note that this law would make it permissive, meaning departments do not have to change their current hiring practices if they do not want to.

It is also important to note that certain municipalities across Ohio already have the authority to hire 18-21 year olds under the home rule provisions established in Article XVIII, Section 7 of the Ohio Constitution<sup>7</sup>. Many other states already hire at 18, including: California, Georgia, Iowa, Louisiana, Michigan, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Vermont, Virginia, West Virginia, Washington, and Wyoming<sup>8</sup>. With municipalities already taking advantage of the privileges afforded them by home-rule – Columbus hires at 20 years old<sup>9</sup> and Akron hires at 20.5 years old<sup>10</sup> – and 18-year-old officers already working in 14 other states, why can't we let Ohio's sheriff and police departments do the same?

This change will help ease our current officer shortage, and will allow Ohioans entering the field of law enforcement to be able to start the career they want to pursue sooner.

I want to close by thanking all those who are willing risk their lives every day for the safety of our communities across Ohio. To our Ohio Police officers: we appreciate all the work you do – thank you for keeping us safe. We back the blue.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I would now like to invite my joint-sponsor Senator Reynolds to tell you more about the benefits of this legislation.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.lsc.ohio.gov/assets/organizations/legislative-service-commission/files/members-briefs-volume-134-municipal-home-rule.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> [R-135-0249](https://www.lsc.ohio.gov/assets/organizations/legislative-service-commission/files/members-briefs-volume-134-municipal-home-rule.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.columbus.gov/police-officer/minimum-qualifications/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://joinakronpolice.com/police-officer/>

As Senator Roegner mentioned, we are experiencing a workforce crisis in law enforcement departments across the State of Ohio. Many departments are challenged with staffing shortages, recruiting challenges, and retention concerns due to mass resignations, buyouts and officer retirements. *The Columbus Dispatch* reported that in 2021, the Columbus Police Department had 74 officers retire, with two additional officers who retired on disability and another two whose retirements were still pending. Another 15 officers resigned during this time and about 100 additional officers, with 25 or more years of experience, planned to retire through the buyout program that paid each of the officers \$200,000.

This has forced many urban police departments to find new strategies to recruit law enforcement officers to replace those who have left the workforce. Strategies like implementing lateral transfers, which have sucked the life out of our local municipal police departments, and recruiting police officers out-of-state, since the amount of qualified lateral transfer applicants have plummeted.

According to an article from *The Columbus Dispatch*, applicants of lateral transfers have depleted since more than a third did not meet the minimum requirements. Lateral transferring of officers has proven to be an ineffective solution to this crisis. Lateral transfers of officers have depleted local police departments in the State of Ohio. Allowing officers to join the police force at 18 rather than 21 is a workforce solution that provides permissive authority to our local governments in Ohio to staff their police departments. Which will exemplify support for local governance instead of being a barrier to the success of our local governments. It will also increase public safety by increasing police coverage in our neighborhoods.

This bill is a common sense solution to help decrease our workforce shortage of police officers. Currently, the Ohio Revised Code permits one to be a firefighter at 18 years old. Furthermore, 18 year old males are required to register with the Selective Service and may be drafted to fight for our country during. Wartime, which has been the standard since 1971 in WWI. Eighteen year olds can also enlist to serve in the U.S. military.

Furthermore, various career tech programs across the State of Ohio offer criminal justice and law enforcement programs for high schoolers, and 18 year olds have the ability to participate in the Ohio Peace Officer Training Academy. Those who are trained at the police academy must wait until they turn 21 years old to be hired as a sworn police officer. As a result, this time gap from police academy graduation and employment causes a loss of recruitment of potential police officers and may reduce retention of the information learned during police training.

Lowering the age at which one can swear to become a police officer is beneficial to not only the community, but also the individual. Let us imagine for a moment that before us, we have two young Ohioans about to embark on their career. While the first could become a firefighter at 18 years old<sup>11</sup>, or enlist in the military and complete basic training during the summer between their Junior and Senior years of high school at 17 years old (with parental consent)<sup>12</sup>, outside of home-rule specific scenarios, the second cannot become a sworn police officer in Ohio before 21 years old<sup>13</sup>. The median pay for a Security Guard, a job an 18-year-old waiting to become a police officer might consider, is \$31,470 per year,<sup>14</sup> while a first-year police officer in Bath, Ohio, makes \$55,307 in their first year and it bumps up to \$59,488 after that<sup>15</sup>. Over the three years that friend

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<sup>11</sup> <https://codes.ohio.gov/ohio-revised-code/section-124.42>

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.military.com/join-armed-forces/join-the-military-basic-eligibility.html#:~:text=You%20must%20be%20a%20U.S.,old%20applicants%20require%20parental%20consent\).](https://www.military.com/join-armed-forces/join-the-military-basic-eligibility.html#:~:text=You%20must%20be%20a%20U.S.,old%20applicants%20require%20parental%20consent).)

<sup>13</sup> <https://codes.ohio.gov/ohio-revised-code/section-124.41>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/protective-service/security-guards.htm#tab-5>

<sup>15</sup> [https://www.bathtownship.org/government/departments\\_and\\_divisions/administration/employment\\_opportunities.php](https://www.bathtownship.org/government/departments_and_divisions/administration/employment_opportunities.php)

worked as a security guard rather than a police officer, they missed out on \$79,873 in earning – an amount greater than two years’ time working as a security guard. This whole time the firefighter, allowed to join at 18, has been working and earning to their full potential.

We can ensure that those who want to begin a career in law enforcement can do so at the same time as their peers who voluntarily join the military, are drafted or become a firefighter and we can do so easily. This bill is simple and impactful, establishing parity for the age at which an Ohioan can protect their fellow Buckeyes at home and abroad. This change will help ease our current officer shortage, and will allow Ohioans entering the field of law enforcement to earn more and sooner.

Thank you for this opportunity to give sponsor testimony on this matter. We would be happy to answer any questions you have at this time.