

PROPONENT TESTIMONY FOR SENATE BILL 53

Chairwoman Roegner, Vice Chair Antani, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Committee. My name is William C. Hayes and I represent the Pataskala Police Department, where I work as a patrol officer. I am here to testify in support of Senate Bill 53.

I have lived in Pataskala, Ohio for nearly my entire life, and I graduated from Watkins Memorial High School in 2020. During my senior year of high school, the unpredictable happened when COVID-19 struck and impacted every single American. I consider myself lucky, however, since my health was not negatively impacted by COVID. Because of the pandemic, I was forced to sit inside and figure out what I wanted to do with my life after high school. While sitting in my room for days on end, I had finally come up with a conclusion for what I wanted to pursue after high school. This conclusion was law enforcement.

I had imagined that once I got to my conclusion, life would become a lot easier, but I could not have been more wrong. Though I had finally come to my conclusion, I would immediately realize that I would only be 19 years old by the time I graduated the police academy. I found myself in a situation that every high school graduate who desires to go into law enforcement finds themselves in. I had two realistic options, which was either doing nothing until I was old enough for an academy or going to a four year college and likely going into a different profession by the time I graduated. With the cost of college and being nearly 22 years old by the time I would graduate, the police academy would no longer be a sustainable option. But instead of quitting there, I kept looking at my options. I would eventually find that my hometown of Pataskala did not fall under the civil service and has their own Public Board of Review that oversees hiring for the city. Another important detail was finding that the city charter states that you only have to be 18 years old to work for the city and does not specifically mention the police department.

Once my possible eligibility for hire was confirmed to be true, I enrolled in the two-year criminal justice program at Columbus State Community College. This program consists of one full year of course work, followed by a full year of the police academy. While registering, I found that I had already completed enough college courses while in high school to be immediately eligible for the police academy.

I began the police academy at 18 years old and graduated at 19 years old. Since graduating the academy, I have earned an associate's degree and am currently pursuing my bachelor's degree at Franklin University. Not long after graduating the academy, I was sworn in as a patrol officer at the Pataskala Police Department. Despite all of the public attention I received due to my age, I was held to the same standard as any new hire. I have thoroughly enjoyed the time I have spent working in Pataskala. We have a fantastic community and a great work environment. This upcoming June will mark two years since I was hired. When I was first hired the Pataskala Police Department had three open spots for full-time officers, meaning there was a total of twenty full-time officers employed by the city. Now, almost two years later, we are fully staffed with a total of twenty-three full-time officers.

We are very fortunate to be fully staffed considering the ways in which officers have been leaving departments in droves. Departments losing officers has been an ongoing trend throughout the past few years, whether the cause be lateral transferring, retirements, or just leaving the career field altogether. This trend is a major reason why I believe this legislation is important. Giving departments *permissive* ability to hire officers at eighteen will give them the opportunity to properly staff their department and have enough resources to protect the community they serve.

I consider my story to be unique. I would not have been able to begin this career if it were not for many factors. If it were not for God leading me down this path to begin with and the City of Pataskala believing in me as an employee, I would not be standing here today speaking to you all. I also think that I need to credit absolute sheer luck for my story. All the pieces seemed to align for me from the end of high school to the time I was being sworn in.

My story is the exact reason why I am supporting this bill. I had an incredibly rare set of circumstances that assisted me into my position. There are not many people that have the same ability to take college courses at their high school. There are especially not many people who can find an agency that allows officers to be hired under twenty-one years old. This bill will remove the gap and allow high school graduates to pursue law enforcement careers directly after high school, which will assist in curbing the shortage of police officers very quickly.

The desire to go into law enforcement is still very much alive. I help coach a club high school rugby team in Pataskala and I am often asked by players how they should pursue a career in law enforcement so that they can go straight into the police academy like I did. Every time I am asked this question it is usually followed by a discouraging answer since one of the only possible routes is to have my exact circumstances. I would love to someday help answer these questions in a way more promising.

I will close my testimony by addressing the most probable topic of opposition with this bill, which is the assumed immaturity of individuals between the ages of 18-20 years old. This is a very reasonable topic to bring up, but I do not believe that it should stop this bill from passing. If this bill were to pass, it grants police departments the *permissive ability* to hire at eighteen years old. It does not *instruct* police departments to hire at a younger age, it only gives them the option. The maturity of an individual applying for a position should be judged by the police department interested, which would be conducted in the same way as every other applicant, through background checks, interviews, at-home interviews, and any other way the department would see fit. I believe that assuming an individual is too immature to begin this career simply based on their age is unfair to the individual. Maturity level can only be determined by getting to know the individual, which the department is responsible for when they consider them for hire.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony today. I am happy to answer any questions at this time.

