



Senate Government Oversight Committee  
RE: Senate Bill 53  
April 19, 2023

Opponent Testimony  
Written Only

Elaine Schleiffer, co-founder, REACH NEO

To Chair Roegner, Vice Chair Antani, and Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in opposition of Senate Bill 53, which would reduce the minimum age requirement for individuals entering law enforcement careers.

My name is Elaine, my pronouns are she/her, and I am a community organizer living on the west side of Cleveland. I am a member of Cleveland's Mental Health Residents Advisory Committee, a piece of our consent decree work, and I am also a co-founder of REACH: Responding with Empathy, Access, and Community Healing, Cuyahoga County's grassroots coalition advocating for the expansion of behavioral health crisis services.

I work to improve our access to behavioral health crisis services because as a someone who is "dual diagnosis" (meaning I have a significant mental illness diagnosis as well as a substance use disorder diagnosis), and as a community organizer helping others in similar moments of need, I have seen hundreds of examples of neighbors not receiving the behavioral healthcare they need, and winding up in severe crisis and interacting with the police because of it. Behavioral health crises can include severe addiction or withdrawal symptoms, disruptive mental health symptoms, episodes of paranoia or psychosis, and the kinds of erratic and potentially violent symptoms that put police officers on edge.

In fact, people in behavioral health crises experience disproportionate violence from law enforcement. The Washington Post has found that 25% of people who are shot and killed by police officers suffer from acute mental illness at the time of their death. According to the Treatment Advocacy Center, people with untreated mental illness are 16 times more likely to be killed during a police encounter than other people approached by law enforcement.

There are many drivers behind these terrifying statistics. We don't train police officers in behavioral health symptom mediation. We don't train police officers in addiction or withdrawal

symptom mediation. We offer our police officers only a few hours of training in crisis intervention and de-escalation, and a few more in-service training hours each year, some of which might focus on crisis response or behavioral health. The trauma-informed, healthcare-based response that is needed for behavioral crises is not the skill set with which we equip our police officers.

Behavioral health symptoms can be scary to witness. They can include emotional and verbal outbursts, repetitive physical movements, agitation, anxiety, self-harming behaviors, and paranoia. For people untrained or inexperienced in these kinds of crises, this can cause a lot of fear and anxiety.

The ability to mediate that fear and anxiety comes with age and complete brain development, as well as adequate training and support. **In Senate Bill 53, the Ohio legislature is asking teenagers and young adults whose brains have not yet completed development, and who do not possess adequate experience or training, to be our first responders and frontline on the street, reacting to complicated crisis scenarios.**

At 18, 19, and 20 years old, the last parts of our brains to mature are the parts that control executive function, like complex problem solving, impulse control, high pressure decision-making, and mediating nervous system responses. A police officer in the age bracket specified by this bill would be confronted by complicated crisis scenarios while their own brains are struggling to moderate their nervous systems, their fight or flight impulses, and the amount of fear and danger that they feel. The more fear and anger that those officers feel and are unable to mediate with their executive functions in their brain, the more likely they are to escalate the crisis rather than de-escalate it.

**This scenario has the potential to create trauma and harm both for our police officers and for our community.** PTSD in our first responders is a growing crisis, and one that Governor DeWine recently allocated millions of dollars toward, so that we can offer better mental health supports for our first responders. Leveraging 18, 19, and 20 year olds as police officers just to fill out the ranks of training classes will create young people with short careers and lifelong PTSD diagnoses. Our police force will grind up and spit out young people, and increase their trauma and the trauma in our communities.

**Lowering the age requirement to act as a law enforcement officer will create more danger in our communities, more trauma among our police departments, and more deaths of people like me who are caring for challenging behavioral health diagnoses.**

I ask you to VOTE NO on SB 53.

Thank you,

Elaine Schleiffer  
Cleveland OH