



GAS WORKERS UNION LOCAL G-555

UTILITY WORKERS UNION of AMERICA, AFL-CIO



EDDIE HALL
EXECUTIVE PRESIDENT

PAUL TALBOO
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Proponent Testimony: Senate Bill 88

Chairman Manning, Vice-Chairman Reynolds, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, my name is Paul Talboo and I am the Executive Vice-President of Gas Workers Union Local G-555 of the Utility Workers Union of America. Our Local represents bargaining unit employees for Dominion Energy Ohio. Dominion Energy Ohio is a natural gas utility in Ohio headquartered in Cleveland serving 1.2 million natural gas customers. We have approximately 1500 employees who work in the state of Ohio; roughly 1000 of those employees are represented by Local G-555.

I am here today as a proponent of SB 88. I address you all today as the voice of the forgotten first responders. Utility Workers across this country, and here in the great state of Ohio, are responsible for building, servicing, and maintaining the energy infrastructure many take for granted. When you flip a switch and your lights come on, when the thermostat clicks and your furnace or water heater fires, when you turn the handle on your faucet and receive safe drinking water, or when, god-forbid, you dial 9-1-1 and the phone rings on the other end with emergency services -- that is all thanks to the tireless work of Utility Workers.

Dominion, like most utility companies, is a 24-hour-a-day / 7-day-a-week operation, which requires our men and women to work all hours of the day or night, in all weather conditions, and in every neighborhood we serve. I am honored to represent the gas workers of DEO, whose dedication was never more on display than throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, where we risked our own safety to continue to provide safe and reliable natural gas, even when that meant entering the homes of confirmed-positive customers. Stay-at-home orders don't apply to our Members -- we were expected to continue to provide the same quality service, and our Members delivered. We kept our customers in gas, and responded to every emergency, all while being awarded our 4th straight AGA Safety award for large distribution gas companies.

I mentioned in my intro that Utility Workers are the "forgotten first responders". Many only consider first responders to be Police, Fire, or EMS -- most fail to realize that in cases of emergencies involving natural gas, Fire and Police hold a safe perimeter, while the Members I represent enter a dangerous scene and make it safe for our customers, the community, and those same first responders standing by. We don't have the option to wait for conditions to improve, or to choose what areas we would or would not like to respond to. That makes my Members vulnerable -- vulnerable to weather, vulnerable to hazards, and vulnerable to those who would wish to inflict harm or threaten to inflict harm for their own gain.

In recent years, we have seen our employees in the field increasingly face menacing, threats and even violence while they are performing the duties of their job. So much so, it is hard to narrow down their stories, but, if I may, I'd like to share some of those with you now:





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- During the pandemic, while responding to a gas leak, a Construction & Maintenance Technician was accosted by an irate individual, who spit in his face and threatened him with a gun. The City of Cleveland basically gave up on pursuing charges as they knew they couldn't charge this as a felony.
- A Member in Corrosion Prevention entered a property in a suburb in NW Summit County where an abandoned airstrip sits. While checking a test point within the utility right-of-way, two individuals, both brandishing firearms, attempted to prevent the employee from leaving the property by boxing him in with their vehicles, causing the Member to engage in a high-speed chase down the runway and into a hairpin turn to evade whatever harm they were capable of perpetrating. Again, Police refused to take this seriously, knowing it would only likely be a misdemeanor.
- The same Member, within a few months of the prior incident, was shot at while working in the City of Cleveland, when a customer discharged a weapon in his direction attempting to stop thieves from fleeing with the catalytic converter to his vehicle. Police, when flagged down near the scene, responded with, "What do ya want us to do?"
- We have had a customer field representative struck by a car in Canton. The driver asked if she was okay and left the scene; basically a hit & run. The driver wasn't even issued a citation and efforts to compel the city to take action have gone ignored.
- Each year there are multiple incidents involving service men and women being held within the homes of angry customers, either with weapons, threats of violence, or physical intimidation
- Each year there are incidents of our men and women being mugged on duty, many in broad daylight.
- Every day my members are subjected to threats as they perform their normal duties; threatened with violence if we step foot onto their property, met at the customer's doors with weapons; held inside of homes against their will; harassed by passersby. We have been shot at. We have been assaulted. We have had our lives threatened.

I'm not here to suggest that a utility worker's life is more important than anyone else's, but I ask you to appreciate that our men and women ARE first responders. When there is an emergency, no matter where or when, our men and women respond immediately; all utility workers do. Whether there is blowing gas, downed power or communication lines, or ruptured water lines, utility workers respond in order to protect the lives and property of the people and communities we serve. We go into places alone, that many choose not to, at all hours of the night to do a job that won't wait for the relative safety of daylight. Again, our work makes us vulnerable; whether our heads are down as we work in a ditch, are inside of the home of a stranger, or are up on a utility pole with no means of escape.

Our men and women and all utility workers should feel safe while we serve the communities of this great State. In these times we are living in, people are becoming increasingly desperate. It is my belief that increasing the penalty for those who threaten utility workers could serve as a deterrent and may make someone think twice before acting impulsively. If this bill can save the life of one of the men or women I serve alongside, or prevent the mental and physical harm these incidents can cause them, it will have done its job.





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I thank you for your time today and look forward to answering any questions you may have.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Paul M. Talboo'.

Paul Talboo, Executive Vice-President
Gas Workers Union Local G-555
Utility Workers Union of America, AFL-CIO

