

Chairwoman Kunze, Vice Chair Reineke, Ranking Member Antonio and members of the Senate Transportation Committee... my name is Director Darren Stout, and I am here today to provide proponent testimony on HB 194. I have been a law enforcement officer for over 23 years and have been blessed with the opportunity to investigate local, state and federal drug crimes for the past 18 years. I began my drug enforcement career working as a field agent, a federal task force officer, and rose to rank of Director of the MCDTF. I currently serve as the Vice President of the Ohio Task Force Commanders Association, and I can testify first hand that the primary issue facing Ohio Drug Task Forces is funding. With the rising cost of business, law enforcement is not immune to this trend. Inflated costs and ancillary expenses are requiring law enforcement to do more with less funding. This is especially problematic with specialized units, as they often cost more to fund and are habitually the first cut to fill public safety staffing shortages or budgetary constraints. On behalf of OTFCA, which represents more than 40 Ohio Drug Task Forces, funding sources on the state and federal level have significantly diminished over the past decade. Further, when the Ohio Drug Law Enforcement fund legislation was enacted, there were far fewer task forces vying for funding. Today, that number has nearly doubled, exhausting a once solvent fund.

Ohio Drug Task Forces realize that a multi-faceted approach is necessary to combat the drug problem in the state of Ohio. This must include efforts of not only traditional enforcement, but education services, outreach services and treatment services. Many of our partner Task Forces have taken this approach without any additional funding for the increased efforts and capacity. This is a model that works but requires adequate funding to maintain sustainability. For example, in FY 2022, the fatal overdose rate in Medina County was reduced by 43.24% in comparison to 2021. This staggering statistic, I feel is largely attributed to the collaborative approach of enforcement, education and treatment.

As an administrator of one such local drug task force that is 100% grant funded, I can attest to the importance of funding for the vital mission of drug enforcement throughout the state of Ohio. On the heels of the opiate epidemic, where Ohio was one of the hardest hit states in the country, there has been a shift from opiate abuse to stimulant abuse in the form of cheap and extremely potent methamphetamine. In my region, we are beginning to also see a resurgence of cocaine which was very problematic nationwide in the 90's and 2000's. Locally, the majority of crimes of opportunity or predatory crimes such as smash and grabs, burglaries or theft are deeply rooted in issues dealing with drug abuse and addiction. I can only assume that this is the case throughout the state of Ohio and the United States. Bottom line, the drug crisis in this state is not going away, and our front line defense is our Ohio Drug Task Forces. Enhanced funding for these specially trained and equipped drug units will undoubtedly yield positive results in reducing the availability of illicit drugs in the state of Ohio, thus increasing safety for our Ohio families.