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In support of Legalizing and Expanding Online Raffle Sales for Charitable Organizations.

Presented by: Brandon Johnston
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Chairperson Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to provide proponent testimony on House Bill 476, which would authorize charitable nonprofit organizations to sell raffle tickets online.

House Bill 476 is a focused piece of legislation aimed at supporting nonprofit organizations by explicitly legalizing the sale of online raffle tickets, a method that has been commonly used in Ohio for many years. Recently, the Ohio Attorney General issued cease and desist letters to several organizations, stating that online raffle ticket sales violate the current Ohio Revised Code. HB 476 seeks to address this issue by codifying online raffle sales, ensuring that nonprofit organizations can continue to raise funds in this manner. HB 476 would restore clarity and security to nonprofit fundraising efforts, allowing these organizations to focus on serving their communities without legal uncertainty.

My name is Brandon Johnston and I represent The North Lawrence Fire Department in Stark County. We are a nonprofit fire department that relies on fundraising events to support our vital services. Like many nonprofits across our state we depend heavily on fundraising events to help fund our operations and services.

As our communities and communication methods evolve, the laws governing charitable gaming have not kept pace with technology or modern fundraising realities. Allowing online raffle sales would provide an efficient, transparent, and secure way for nonprofits to reach more supporters, especially at a time when in-person participation is often limited by geography, work schedules, or mobility.

Online raffle sales are essential as they expand reach and increase revenue, allowing fire departments or nonprofits to sell raffle tickets online would enable supporters from across the state and even those living outside their hometowns to participate. Departments that have utilized online raffle systems in other states have seen revenue increase by 50% or more, providing critical funds for equipment, facility improvements, and community programs.

Online raffle sales also enforce transparency and accountability, modern online raffle platforms include features that promote integrity and compliance. They record every transaction, verify participant eligibility, and produce audit-ready reports. This level of transparency protects both the organization and the public, ensuring every dollar is accounted for.

Prior to the Attorney General shutting us down our department had seen funding and benefits like it has never seen before. To put this in perspective: our department typically raises between \$3,000 and \$5,000 during in-person raffles each year. With online participation, those same efforts could potentially yield 200 times the amount.

That difference could fund new turnout gear, upgrade apparatus, or purchase rescue equipment that saves lives.

In April 2022, Gov. DeWine formed a task force to study the volunteer fire service in Ohio. The group was spearheaded by the Ohio Department of Commerce, chaired by State Fire Marshal Kevin Reardon, and composed of local elected officials and firefighters from all around the state.

The comprehensive report contained recommendations across several focus areas, one that included financial stability of Ohio's volunteer fire departments. This could affect the financial stability in a positive way for many volunteer fire departments.

By allowing online raffle sales this could allow many other fire departments in Ohio to generate funding that their organizations have never seen before without burdening their respective tax payers anymore. The cost of equipment, trucks, training and supplies have increased. On average costs of apparatus have doubled, turnout gear a 30% increase and EMS equipment a 50% increase.

When fire departments have the resources they need, everyone in the community benefits — faster response times, better-equipped personnel, and safer outcomes for both residents and first responders.

In closing, authorizing online raffle sales is not about changing the nature of charitable fundraising — it is about making the method more modern.

It offers a secure, transparent, and practical way for local fire departments to raise the funds they need to protect their communities effectively.

By passing this legislation, you will empower the men and women of Ohio's fire service to continue doing what they do best: serving their neighbors, safeguarding their towns, and saving lives all while having the potential to have the much needed funding.

Together, we all have an opportunity to help struggling charitable organizations and bring tremendous assets and programs to communities across this great state.

Thank you, Chairperson and Members of the Committee, for your time, your service, and your consideration. I would be honored to answer any questions you may have.

Brandon A. Johnston
President, North Lawrence Fire Department