

Chair 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. My name is Rob Herrington and I have been the Fire Chief of the Wintersville Volunteer Fire Department for the past 42 years.

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 including ours, 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.

Representative Thomas Hall states in his biography that he is a part-time volunteer firefighter and that “firefighting is the best job in the world”. I would unfortunately have to add “until you have to pay for it”.

The Wintersville Volunteer Fire Department is not a typical volunteer fire department in that our call volume is high enough that we require full time employees in addition to volunteers. We currently staff six firefighter/paramedics around the clock providing fire, rescue, and advanced life support EMS services to 14,000 residents in Jefferson County.

The cost of operating and staffing our department is offset by a six-mil tax levy in the Seven Ranges Fire District. By offset I mean that the levy does not pay all of the expenses and so our department has a long history of fundraising to help pay for the equipment that is needed to protect our community.

Costs associated with the fire service have skyrocketed well beyond normal inflation rates. At a recent Senate hearing chaired by Senator Josh Hawley, it was reported that fire apparatus prices have doubled since 2020. Last summer we replaced a 12 year old ladder truck that cost \$685,000 in 2012 with a 2024 model that cost \$1.3 million. That truck today, only 14 months later, is \$1.6 million and wait times are now approaching 4 years. The same ambulances we purchased in 2020 for \$185,000 now cost over \$360,000 with a 42 month delivery time. These overwhelming cost increases have affected other areas of our operations as well including the turnout gear we wear and the

breathing apparatus that protects us in hazardous atmospheres. I'm sure committee members will find these same problems plaguing their hometown fire departments.

Realizing that we can't go back to our citizens and expect them to absorb all of these costs, we set out to research other ways of raising money. We had been noticing online raffles from a number of other non-profit organizations in Ohio so in March of 2024 we gave it a try. Starting with one gift card raffle at a time, we studied social media marketing, Amazon shopping trends, and online marketing, and slowly we grew our operation. After spending hundreds of hours purchasing everything from lawn tractors to pickup trucks, developing advertising efforts, conducting live raffles on three social media platforms, and shipping and delivering hundreds of prizes, we have grown our raffle to the point that it was paying for all of our apparatus and building payments at the time that the Attorney General shut us down. Unfortunately, our Board of Directors has already determined that without the raffle income we will at the very least have to reduce our staffing level by the end of this year.

It's important to note that online raffles like ours offer complete transparency. Tickets are purchased electronically, emailed to buyers, and tracked until a winner is selected in a live video drawing. All sales are tracked electronically by an internet paysite and all money transfers are automatically deposited directly into a dedicated bank account. There is no cash and not misplaced tickets. No other fundraising method offers the accountability features of these raffles.

Now that I have said the word raffle a few times in this testimony, I am sure that Google and Apple will make sure that the metadata from your cellphone is passed on to advertisers for raffles from all over America. You'll be seeing boat raffles from Florida and car raffles from Pennsylvania pop up on your phone in the next few hours for sure. So, the only question left is: "Why should Ohio non-profits be left out of this amazing and safe way to raise funds?" Whether it be the Wintersville Volunteer Fire Department, the Dayton Humane Society, or St. Judes Research Hospital, there are many great causes that will benefit from House Bill 476. We respectfully ask for your support and we appreciate your time today. Thank you.