

House Bill 79 Proponet Testimony
Ohio House Judiciary Committee
136th General Assembly
Tyler Monk
March 19, 2025

Chair Thomas, Vice Chair Mathews, Ranking Member Isaacsohn, and esteemed members of the House Judiciary Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of House Bill 79.

Quickly, I will introduce myself. My name is Tyler Monk, and I am here testifying on my own behalf as a baseball umpire. This is my fifth year as an OHSAA Certified Umpire. I am currently 22 years old and a student at The Ohio State University studying Philosophy, Politics, and Economics.

Here is the roadmap for my testimony today. First, I will tell you about the importance of passing HB 79. Then, I will offer personal experience that underscores its necessity. Finally, I will attempt to address some opponent testimony you might hear if this bill is fortunate enough to receive an opponent testimony hearing.

With that being said, let me tell you why House Bill 79 is important and needs to be passed.

Sports officials play a vital role in ensuring fairness, safety, and integrity in athletic competition. Whether at the youth, high school, collegiate, or professional level, officials step onto the field or court with the sole purpose of upholding the rules and maintaining order. Unfortunately, they are too often subjected to verbal abuse, intimidation, and, in some cases, outright physical assault.

The National Association of Sports Officials¹ reports that a significant number of officials have experienced threats or physical violence while officiating.

In response to the question, “Is sportsmanship getting better or worse?” responding officials answered:

68.81% worse,
21.25% no change,
10.14% better.

Back in 2017, officials answering the same question said:

57.02% worse,
27.09% no change,
15.89% better.

More than 50% of all respondents have feared for their safety at some point in their career because of administrator, coach, player, or spectator behavior.

¹ <https://www.naso.org/survey/portfolio/sporting-behavior-2023/>

Nearly 12% of all officials who responded have been physically assaulted during or after a sporting event.

Many are leaving the profession due to these dangers, creating a shortage that directly impacts sports programs across our state. Without adequate protections, we risk losing officials and jeopardizing the future of organized sports.

By elevating the penalties for assaulting a sports official, this bill sends a clear message: violence against referees and umpires will not be tolerated.

Ohio law already grants enhanced protections to teachers, healthcare workers, and first responders. Sports officials, who ensure fair play, deserve the same protections. Every athlete, coach, and fan should be able to participate in or enjoy a game knowing that those enforcing the rules are safe.

HB 79 is not just about punishment—it is about deterrence, respect, and ensuring that our sports officials can do their jobs without fear of harm.

Now, I will segue into the second part of my testimony—some personal experience and how it supports what I have just argued.

In my five years as an umpire, I've been fortunate to avoid physical assaults, though, like most officials, I have encountered minor threats.

On one hand, this could be because I'm just that good and have never missed a call.

More likely, it is because I deliberately officiate what I view as "safer" games—such as Ohio High School Athletic Association (OHSAA) games and higher-level travel games at local high schools.

However, this cautious selection underscores a significant issue: games more susceptible to unruly behavior—like young travel games, youth recreational ball, and those in more remote areas—are often left without experienced officials. This disparity leaves less-experienced officials to manage higher-risk environments, potentially compromising the quality and safety of these games.

The shortage of officials willing to oversee these "less safe" games has broader implications. Young athletes in these leagues may face game cancellations or reduced opportunities to play, hindering their development and love for the sport. Moreover, the absence of seasoned officials can lead to poorly managed games, increasing the risk of injuries and escalating tensions among players and spectators.

Enacting HB 79 would serve as a crucial deterrent against assaults on sports officials. By imposing stricter penalties, the bill aims to foster a safer environment that encourages experienced officials to cover a wider range of games, including those currently deemed high-risk. This legislative action would not only protect officials but also ensure that all athletes, regardless of their league or location, have access to fair and well-officiated competitions.

Finally, I want to try to get ahead of some opponent testimony you may have the opportunity to hear. Last General Assembly, for a similar bill, HB 139, the House Criminal Justice Committee heard from the Ohio Prosecuting Attorneys Association that the law should “not create special classes of victims based on profession” and that “these bills make people in other lines of work seem less deserving of justice”.²

First, I want to express my appreciation for the thoughtful concerns raised by the Ohio Prosecuting Attorneys Association. It is clear that this opposition does not stem from a lack of concern for sports officials but rather from a broader principle of equitable justice under the law. This is a perspective worth serious consideration, and I respect the intention behind it.

That being said, I would like to gently push back on the idea that increasing penalties for assaults against sports officials creates an unjust hierarchy among victims.

Ohio law already recognizes that certain professions—those who serve critical public functions—require additional legal protections. Teachers, school bus drivers, and school administrators, for example, are afforded enhanced penalties if assaulted while engaged in their duties³. Specifically, the law states that this protection extends to school officials while serving at athletic events. Given that sports officials perform an essential role in those same events—often in higher-risk and more emotionally charged environments—it seems inconsistent not to extend us the same protections.

Additionally, the argument that such bills make other workers seem “less deserving of justice” does not fully capture the reasoning behind these enhanced penalties. The goal is not to diminish justice for some but to ensure that those who are at heightened risk due to the nature of their work receive the necessary legal deterrence. Peace officers, correctional employees, healthcare workers, and child services employees have all been recognized for facing unique threats in the course of their duties, and Ohio law reflects this reality. Sports officials, like teachers and bus drivers, often find themselves in volatile situations where emotions run high, making them particularly vulnerable to targeted acts of violence.

A better way to think about this issue is that increasing the penalty for assaulting a sports official is similar to how Ohio imposes increased penalties for traffic violations in construction zones to protect workers at higher risk due to their proximity to moving traffic. These enhanced penalties do not suggest that regular pedestrians are less valued under the law; rather, they acknowledge the elevated risks faced by construction workers and aim to provide them with additional protection.

Again, I deeply appreciate the commitment to justice expressed in this testimony. However, I believe HB 79 aligns with existing legal principles that recognize the need for targeted protections in specific high-risk professions.

In conclusion, the passage of HB 79 is essential to safeguard sports officials and maintain the integrity of athletic competitions across Ohio. By enhancing protections, we can address the

²<http://ohiochannel.org/video/ohio-house-criminal-justice-committee-10-10-2023?start=36:10>

³ Ohio Revised Code Section 2903.13 | Assault, Effective: October 3, 2023

official shortage, ensure the safety of all participants, and promote a culture of respect and sportsmanship.

I urge this committee to stand with Ohio's sports officials and send a clear message: violence against referees and umpires will **not** be tolerated.