



**Ohio House Public Safety Committee
Testimony of Director Andy Wilson
Ohio Department of Public Safety
February 19, 2025**

Chair Abrams, Vice Chair Miller, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the House Public Safety Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am Andy Wilson, Director of the Ohio Department of Public Safety. It is an honor to stand in front of a group of legislators who I know share my belief that keeping people safe is the foremost responsibility we have in government.

When I testified on the DPS budget two years ago, I had been serving as Director for only a few weeks. It had been a whirlwind first month on the job with the ongoing response to the train derailment in East Palestine. While that was in many ways an unprecedented event, I look back on the past two years and realize that the job has not slowed even a little bit. Over the past two years, I have traveled throughout the state and met with our great partners in local law enforcement, joined troopers for ride-alongs in each of our nine Highway Patrol districts, ridden along with fire departments and EMS agencies, met with county emergency management officials, visited BMV deputy registrars and had long conversations with the customers in those BMVs. I've also visited our driver exam stations where I actually hopped in a car on a whim and took the driver's test. I'm happy to report that I passed the test, although my palms were sweating, and I had a death grip on that steering wheel as I worked my way through those cones. All along the way, I have enjoyed the chance to visit with these and so many other individuals who work every day to keep our (yours and my) families, friends, and neighborhoods safe.

Thanks to the leadership of Governor DeWine, and the support of the General Assembly, the Department of Public Safety has had a successful two years. With your continued support, this budget will allow us to build on the important work we've already started and ensure that it continues to thrive in the years ahead.

I want to start by highlighting some of our most significant accomplishments made possible through your support in the last operating budget and then discuss key new items in this budget.

Ohio Narcotics Intelligence Center and The Ohio School Safety Center

Two of the initiatives created under Governor DeWine to keep all of Ohio safe are the Ohio Narcotics Intelligence Center (ONIC) and the Ohio School Safety Center (OSSC). You already know that the ONIC is comprised of criminal intelligence analysts and forensic computer specialists that assist local law enforcement agencies and drug task forces by providing investigative and case support as well as information-sharing networks. With the support of the General Assembly over multiple budgets, the ONIC is now operating in four locations across Ohio – Columbus, Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Toledo. Almost every week, I learn of another win that the ONIC has earned through the criminal prosecution of drug traffickers. Last year the ONIC contributed to a conviction that led to the seizure of a record-breaking \$150 million in cryptocurrency. This multi-agency effort was the largest digital asset seizure in DEA history and successfully removed another drug dealer from our streets, ensuring that he can no longer peddle his poison to our fellow Ohioans.

In the area of school safety, the OSSC leads the nation in protecting students through behavioral threat assessments, school bus active aggressor drills, suicide prevention, armed school staff essential training, and situational awareness simulators, among others. The OSSC team continues to expand its in-demand educational opportunities. In 2024 alone, the OSSC provided in-person and virtual training to 17,564 individuals who are tasked with keeping our kids safe in and around their schools.

Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles (BMV)

DPS's work to improve the lives of everyone across the State does not stop there. One of the divisions that I like to talk about the most is the BMV because the BMV is where we have the greatest opportunity to safeguard the most valuable resource of every Ohioan.... that is their time. Nobody wants to spend a minute of their free time in a government office waiting in line for a mandated license or registration. We know this, so we are vigilant in leveraging technology and innovation to reduce the amount of time that Ohio drivers and vehicle owners actually have to spend in person at a BMV office. As a result, the average wait time at an Ohio BMV office last year was 12 minutes, while nationally, the average wait time is 44 minutes. I am proud of the work that the entire team at the Ohio BMV does to continuously improve the efficiency of the customer experience. Specifically, Ohioans will be glad to know that the Get in Line Online system has saved Ohioans over 700 million hours of waiting in line since its launch in 2020. With the implementation of the "Chat with Charlie" virtual assistant feature on the BMV website, those with questions no longer need to wait for normal business hours to call and speak to a customer service representative. And, last July, Ohio became the fifth state in the country to provide residents the option to securely add their driver license or state ID card to the Apple wallet.

This budget will allow the BMV to provide the service that you and your constituents expect and it will allow us to protect our most valuable resource, the free time of our fellow Ohioans.

Divisions of Emergency Medical Services (EMS) and Emergency Management Agency (EMA)

When someone is suffering a life-threatening medical emergency, the moments between the initial event and when first responders arrive are critical. Every year about 350,000 Americans suffer a sudden cardiac arrest – 90% of them die. It often takes 2 minutes before anyone calls 911. In some rural areas, it can take up to a half hour before EMS units arrive on scene. In July, the Division of EMS kicked off Every Minute Counts campaign to encourage Ohioans to provide life-saving bystander care. We believe that encouraging bystander intervention and care is critical to bridging the gap in our more rural areas where EMS response can be slow.

Over this past biennium, Ohio EMA has done everything from respond to the train derailment in East Palestine, coordinate state and federal assistance to help Ohioans recover from devastating tornado outbreaks last spring, to plan and coordinate a state-wide approach to the 2024 total solar eclipse. In this budget, we include a new state hazard mitigation program. We know that this \$1 million investment in mitigation, will lead to \$6 million in savings on future disasters.

Office of Criminal Justice Services

In everything we do at Public Safety, we prioritize supporting our local partners. Last year, the Office of Criminal Justice Services completed the awarding of \$250 million in grants that Governor DeWine dedicated to local law enforcement and first responders. That is money that is going directly to your local police departments and sheriffs' offices to help protect those who live in your jurisdiction. They also created the Ohio Collaborative Law Enforcement Accreditation Program, the nation's first no-cost, statewide law enforcement accreditation program which certifies law enforcement agencies that implement nearly three dozen standards reflective of the best in law enforcement. Last week, we were pleased to announce the first ten agencies to complete the accreditation process and we look forward to many more agencies being accredited in the future.

This budget also requests funds to enhance the financial support of local drug task forces through grants administered by OCJS. The last two years saw reductions in the overdose deaths, but we can't let up. The current illicit drug market presents new and increasingly challenging hurdles to stop the flow of illegal drugs into Ohio. We see drugs that are more potent than fentanyl. Oftentimes, sophisticated methods are used to conceal lethal drug mixtures. So that we don't lose ground, we need to continue our support of the Ohio's drug task forces.

Law Enforcement Initiatives and Ohio Homeland Security

Another way we support local law enforcement is through the Office of Law Enforcement Initiatives (LEI). LEI is dedicated to supporting law enforcement and first responders and to building stronger relationships between law enforcement and the public. Two of our major areas of focus are law enforcement recruitment and retention and first responder wellness.

I am especially proud of our work developing JointBlue.org. This site informs visitors of available law enforcement recruitment resources and coordinates the publication of career opportunities for Ohio's local law enforcement agencies. Again, this isn't for the Highway Patrol or state law enforcement, this is direct recruiting for your local agencies. Often, either because of their size or personnel shortages, these agencies cannot afford to have a person dedicated to recruitment. LEI steps in to help.

We also support local public safety through the work of Ohio Homeland Security. Its Critical Infrastructure Protection Unit (CIU) completed 78 Security & Vulnerability Assessments (SVA's) to secure the state's critical infrastructure. Through these efforts, the CIU enhanced Ohio's capacity to protect its vital assets and respond effectively to evolving threats. In September, the entire CIU responded to Springfield to assist the community by conducting 25 SVA's for government buildings, schools, businesses, and facilities. Homeland Security's Terrorism & Analysis Unit also provided support to local law enforcement when they received swatting and doxing calls that caused local schools and businesses to shut down.

Ohio Investigative Unit (OIU)

Earlier this year, we elevated the OIU to a standalone division within Public Safety and were fortunate to be able to hire Retired Union County Sheriff Jamie Patton to lead it.

Every day, OIU agents enforce criminal and administrative code at 26,000 liquor permit holders and 9,500 SNAP retailers across Ohio. They investigate suspected illegal activity in and around retailers, bars,

restaurants, carry-outs, and special events. OIU has established working relationships with local law enforcement as well as other state and federal agencies. Those relationships would carry over well to enforcement of the recent legislation legalizing adult use marijuana.

In this budget, and through other pending legislation, we are proposing to expand OIU's work to include statewide enforcement of marijuana laws and regulations, while maintaining the same concurrent jurisdiction between OIU and local law enforcement. Expanding enforcement agents' current scope of authority is a natural fit with the type of work that is already being done by OIU.

Driver Training in Schools

I'd like to turn my focus for a moment to driver training. We know that driver education programs help to create safer drivers. Unfortunately, the cost and availability of driver education can be a barrier for many new teen drivers in Ohio with courses ranging in cost from \$300-\$800 and lengthy wait times for in-car training. Governor DeWine has challenged us to make drivers education more accessible by reducing these and other barriers.

Prior to the last budget, the Ohio Traffic Safety Office kicked off the Drive to Succeed Program which has provided grants to local entities to fund scholarships for high school aged students to complete Driver Training. In this budget, we are proposing to take another step toward ensuring that every Ohio student who wants to take drivers education will have that opportunity. The budget includes funding to provide grants to Ohio's schools to provide their students with low cost and high-quality driver training. It is well past time that we give students the option of taking driver's education as an elective or class at their school. Everyone I talk to about this issue asks me "Why don't we do driver's education in schools anymore"? The proposed grants will be flexible to allow a school to develop its own driver training program or partner with another entity such as an existing driving school or an educational service center to provide additional driver training opportunities to students. We believe that this model will increase access to teen drivers while still protecting and supporting the driving schools that are currently offering this type of training.

Long Term Sustainability of the Highway Patrol

The single most important item for the Department of Public Safety in this budget is ensuring the long-term sustainability of the Ohio State Highway Patrol. I do not want you to leave this testimony with any doubt – if we do not address our looming funding crisis in this budget, the Ohio State Highway Patrol will look very different at the end of this biennium than it does today and that difference will put Ohio citizens in danger. It will also impede our ability to support local agencies that we have developed incredible mutual support relationships with over the past few years.

To set the stage for this discussion, I think it is important to share the history of how we got here. In 2003, the Ohio General Assembly and Governor Taft, made major changes to the method Ohio was using to fund both highway construction and the operation of the Highway Patrol. In that budget, the legislature increased the gasoline tax while also removing the gas tax revenue as a major component of funding for the Highway Patrol. Instead, a new revenue source was identified, and since 2003 the Highway Patrol has been funded primarily through fees associated with driver's licenses and automobile registrations.

Specifically, the driver's license fee was increased from \$11.75 to \$23.75 and the annual fee on vehicle registration was increased by \$11 to \$34.50. While some permissive taxes have been added on vehicle registration for the benefit of local governments, the portion of these fees that goes to the Highway Patrol has remained unchanged since 2003.

For the past 22 years, the Department of Public Safety has been a good steward of the funds that have been collected through those two fees. But when an operating budget is built on a fee that doesn't change, inflation and necessary cost of living increases grow and the budget reaches an inevitable tipping point. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, every dollar today buys only 58% of what it could buy in 2003. Ohioans see this in their everyday lives in the cost of groceries, vehicles, homes and every other expense in the household budget. Likewise, the cost to run the Patrol has increased – their vehicles and equipment are all significantly more expensive than they were 22 years ago.

Again, as these costs have gone up, the fees that were designed to cover them have remained unchanged.

In this budget, we have proposed two increases in fees:

- The first is an increase of \$10 in the motor vehicle registration fee. This fee increase is accompanied by language that guarantees every dollar collected from the increase will be used to fund only the operations of the Ohio State Highway Patrol.
- The second is a \$3 increase in the cost of titling a motor vehicle. These funds will be used to support the Highway Patrol's off highway work including security here at Capitol Square and other state properties, executive protection, criminal investigations, and assistance with responses to large events like the NATO Parliamentary Assembly Spring Session in Dayton later this spring.

I know that asking for a fee increase is a serious request, but without a funding fix, by the end of the upcoming biennium the Highway Patrol will be facing a deficit. The current funding source is no longer sustainable under our current operating structure. We will have no choice but to reduce the services that the Highway Patrol offers, and this will have serious impacts across the state.

I think it is imperative to point out that Ohio is not a "State Police" state. We have the Ohio State Highway Patrol not the Ohio State Police. Our system works incredibly well because of the distinct roles played by the various local and state law enforcement agencies. We absolutely respect and support our current system. Over the last few years as local law enforcement agencies across the state have suffered severe shortages in personnel... shortages that are so serious that response time and minimum staffing levels have been impacted, and the Ohio State Highway Patrol has been a valuable partner in relieving pressure on some of our local partners. A great example is in communities where the local police department doesn't have a traffic unit. Often the patrol will work with those agencies to respond to crashes or do proactive traffic enforcement. This frees up the local agencies to respond to murders, rapes, robberies, and domestic violence. In the post-Covid / post-George-Floyd era of law enforcement, agencies must be able to depend on each other for mutual support and help. If our funding situation isn't addressed in this budget, our ability to provide some of this support that local agencies seem to like and often request will be drastically reduced.

I want to spend the remainder of our time this morning partnering with Colonel Jones to share just a few of the many ways that the Highway Patrol directly saves lives and works every day to support local law enforcement agencies across Ohio.

On November 11, 2024, in Jefferson County, a man who was prohibited from having contact with his 7-year-old daughter attempted to pick her up from her school. The school knew of the situation and correctly denied him from taking her. The father went to her home later that day and forcibly took her from the yard, running over a family member with his truck in the process. An Amber Alert was quickly issued.

A call then came into the dispatch center stating the suspect was seen unloading his belongings into a U-Haul truck. That truck was located near Medina and a pursuit ensued. Officers were able to spike the U-Haul's tires and the vehicle became disabled in a parking lot. As officers surrounded the truck, the suspect shot at police and shot out the driver's side window of the truck in the process.

The suspect called 9-1-1, stating he was going to kill his daughter and himself. Law enforcement officers backed away from the truck and called for a SWAT team.

Negotiators tried talking to the suspect, but he kept hanging up on them. The suspect told the little girl she was going to heaven today and live streamed videos on Facebook addressed to the girl's mother telling her that the girl was going to die. If you listen to the 9-1-1 call, you will hear the little girl ask, "Daddy am I going to heaven today"? He told her, "Yes baby, we are both going to heaven today". She said, "No daddy, I don't want to go to heaven today". He absolutely was going to kill her.

At 8:25 PM, a trooper with the Highway Patrol's Special Response Team received a message notifying him of the hostage situation. The trooper was off duty and at home with his family, but he quickly headed to the scene.

While en route, he gathered information to determine the best sniper position. At the scene, he only found one position where he could get a clear view of the suspect. There was a chain link fence between the suspect and the trooper, so he decided to climb on top of his vehicle to get an elevated position, taking him outside of the cover his vehicle would provide and exposing him to danger.

Once he was in position, he had a local sheriff's deputy come to his location so he could have radio communication with the local officers on the scene. He directed another officer to go down the roadway to shine a spotlight in the front of the U-Haul so he could clearly identify the suspect and the hostage. The trooper could see the young hostage sitting on the lap of the suspect with a gun held to her head. From that point, the trooper could see through a 4-inch circle. The suspect was rocking back and forth, so the little girl's head would be in the site picture for one moment and the suspect's head would be in the site picture the next. At some point, the suspect took a deep breath and leaned his head back on the seat.

At that moment, recognizing the gravity and urgency of the situation, the trooper exercised his specialized training as a sniper and took decisive action. He fired a single round through the driver's side window, striking and incapacitating the suspect. His decision saved that little girl's life.

God willing, that mother will be able to see her little girl grow up, graduate from school, get married, have babies herself, all of the amazing experiences that life has to offer.... because of the training, skill, expertise, and decisiveness of an Ohio State Highway Patrol Trooper.

The trooper did all this in just under 5 minutes of arriving on the scene. The lifesaving actions he took on that day are a testament to the discipline and skill the Ohio State Highway Patrol uses every day to enhance the public safety of all Ohioans—even beyond Ohio's roadways.

I am trying not to be alarmist, but without a long-term funding solution, funding and training highly specialized units like the Highway Patrol's SRT will not be possible.

At this time, I'd like to introduce Colonel Charles Jones, Superintendent of the Ohio State Highway Patrol, who will talk more about the work that the Highway Patrol does to support local law enforcement and why this budget is so important to the future of the Patrol.

{Col. Jones Testimony}

Chair Abrams, thank you again for the opportunity to testify. To you and the members of the committee, I know asking to increase fees is not a small request and I do not take this request lightly. Quite literally, the future of the Ohio State Highway Patrol is in the hands of this committee and the General Assembly. Col. Jones and I stand ready to work with you and will be available to meet with you and answer any questions you have in the days ahead.

At this time, the DPS leadership team and I are happy to answer any questions from the committee.