



Chair Schaffer, Vice-Chair Koehler, and Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, my name is Mick Yinger and I am the Executive Director of First Responders' Bridge.

I retired from the Columbus Police Department. My lifelong friend Mike Pavolino and I founded First Responders' Bridge after the tragic murders of Westerville, OH Police Officers Tony Morelli and Eric Joering on February 10, 2018. Mike had just retired from the Westerville Police Dept. That funeral wrecked us both. It brought back so many memories of all the friends we have lost both in the line of duty and to suicide. I've lost numerous friends in the line of duty. I've had 2 former partners and close friends die by suicide. I had an academy classmate take his own life. I was forced to take someone's life out of a shooting, so I know not only what the person goes through but what the family goes through, as well. Pav has experienced similar things.

Pav and I learned we are losing more first responders to suicide than all line-of-duty deaths combined and 85% of first responders have experienced symptoms related to mental health issues during their careers. A February 2024 study found that public safety personnel were found to have a higher rate of psychological health problems. One in every seven police officers worldwide suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression, and one in every ten struggled from other mental illnesses. When compared to the general population, police personnel have approximately twice the prevalence of PTSD and depression (20% vs 7% to 9%) and are associated with a lower quality of life. According to Psychiatric Times, more than a third of firefighters and EMS have considered suicide, which is 10 times the national average. We believe that is unacceptable!

The Bridge provides 3-day, confidential, expense free retreats for active and retired first responders, that includes Law Enforcement, Fire/EMS, Corrections Officers and Dispatchers and their significant other who are experiencing depression, anxiety, PTS or feeling suicidal from the things we see and hear on the job every day. We bring in the best peer speakers and clinicians in the country when it comes to first responder mental health and trauma.

Since 2018, First Responders' Bridge has helped close to 2000 first responders and their significant others from 83 of the 88 counties in Ohio.

I'm appearing before you today to ask this committee and the Ohio Senate to build upon the appropriation supporting First Responder's Bridge and Save A Warrior Foundation included in Sub. House Bill 96. Currently, in the budget before this committee and chamber our organization is being supported through an appropriation of \$150,000 per fiscal year. We are very grateful for the recognition by the Ohio House for the work we do, and the funding will allow us to continue to provide the needed support to our first responder community.

I am respectfully asking for consideration for the current funding level to be increased to the amount of \$500,000 in each year of the biennium in funding support to help organizations like First Responders' Bridge and Save A Warrior Foundation in our shared missions to provide mental health services for our first

responders who are dealing with Depression, Anxiety, PTS or having suicidal ideations, from the things they see and hear on the job every day. With additional financial support The Bridge will be able to expand the number of retreats we offer each year and support the first responders who are currently serving and have served our communities and state.

I would like to thank the committee for your time and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.