

Chairman Kurt Schuring
Senate General Government
and Agency Review Committee
RE: Sub. H. B. No. 308, Proponent

Chairman Schuring, Vice Chairman Rulli, Ranking Minority Member O'Brien and members of the Senate General Government and Agency Review Committee, I thank you for the opportunity to present my testimony on this important piece of legislation which assists First Responders in their battle from the effects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

My name is David Jockers and I am a Paramedic with the City of Cleveland, Division of EMS. I apologize that I am not there in person today as I am working in the City. With the current pandemic plaguing our society, it is difficult for any of us on the front line to take time off as we are needed to support and serve the public in their time of need. However, I write this in support of Sub. H. B. No. 308.

By now all of you have heard some of the horrors and stress which is involved in being a First Responder. The stories, the nightmares, the images carried – many buried. The struggles with addiction, with spouses, with family, with depression. I am not necessarily writing you here today to relive my worst nightmares since becoming a Paramedic for the Division; although I do have them. I am writing you to tell you how I find myself at times – as an outsider looking in on the world of First Responders. An outsider witnessing fewer and fewer people wanting to become First Responders.

A little more about myself – I just turned 50 years old this year. One might think that I had a long and difficult career as a Paramedic for the Division, however that is not completely the case. In fact, I've been with the Division for only 6 years; and have been a Paramedic for only 8 years. Prior to this I had a successful 20-year career working in the media, in broadcast radio in Cleveland. However, with the downsizing of the media over the last 2 decades, like so many others I found myself looking for work. How I became a Paramedic I still don't fully understand, but I do know that one path lead me to another and the next thing I knew, I was putting myself through intense pre-hospital medical training and then found myself on the streets of Cleveland at 44 years old.

I'm 10 years removed from the media now and 6 years working on the streets. At times I find myself observing my peers from a journalist's perspective. Observing and wishing I had an outlet to share what I've seen – which is what I'm trying to do with you here today. I've witnessed firsthand my co-workers' struggles, their silent (and verbal) pleas for help – and yet I've also observed their resilience to fight back and never give up – thinking that they're invulnerable. I observe them while knowing full well that *everyone* eventually reaches a breaking point. That point where they need support. That point where this legislation is needed. This is why I joined our peer support team, to offer my own life experiences and to provide emotional support for my co-workers. However, I now realize that so much more is needed with financial support, and this important legislation is just that.

Surely, in my short 6 years on the street I've seen my share of horrors. I've seen death and dying; I've witnessed the peaceful passing of an elder family member and have also witnessed the tragic death of a teenager who was gunned down in gang violence. I've listened to the pleas of family members begging us to save their loved one – voices and memories you carry around forever. I've wondered if I did enough to save someone's life; or if I did something differently, would it have made a difference. I worked the day a co-worker took his own life from the stresses of his life. As a newer employee at the time, I remember thinking, "Is this what happens to us?"

Last year, my partner and I brought back a co-worker's father who went into cardiac arrest and died; and under extreme circumstances we brought him back. This is a man who is my own age and yet is back to work today. While this ended well, the circumstances and stress of this, I will carry forever as one of the most difficult situations I've ever been in my life.

More recently I've seen the terror in the eyes of the public when we show up at their home – deathly afraid that they or their loved one has COVID, or that they're going to get it and die despite our assurances.

These are memories and images that are difficult at times to process as a middle-aged man. I could not imagine what it's like for someone half my age and who grew up in much different world and time than the committee members and I did. I find myself looking at my co-workers, many of whom are far younger than I am however have been on the streets 2-3x longer than I have. I think about all that they have seen and been a part of. I think about the senior co-workers who are my own age and have been here over 2 decades – and how they were taught to “suck it up” and move on – to repress their feelings and the memories of what they've seen – mostly because there is limited support.

Since my career “reboot” I've heard it from many on how they couldn't imagine starting over – let alone doing what I do; I've heard that common question of how they bet I've seen some “crazy things.” Yes, I have. And as an outsider who is now an insider, I cannot believe there is such limited emotional and financial support for those we trust with our lives. People who are literally sacrificing their own well-being for complete strangers.

This past Friday I trained a cadet who worked all day with us. She graduated high school just last year. She's 18 years old – less than a year older than my own son. She became an EMT through the Division and is now working her way through the academy to join us out on the streets. During our shift she was telling us about all the “trauma” she's already been involved in. Shootings, car accidents, death and dying. My journalist mind kicked in and I started to think about the groundwork which was being laid in this young cadet's world. So young and impressionable and yet such a limited support system for her for when she needs it... and she will.

It's no secret that the nation is seeing a trend away from those seeking to become First Responders. This trend has caused agencies across the country to recruit older people like myself, as well as younger people like my cadet. Regardless of who we are and where we come from, the lack of emotional and financial support for us is a glowing issue which must be addressed to protect and recruit our First Responders. I'm witnessing this firsthand as a one-time outsider now looking in.

Members of the Committee, I thank you again for this opportunity to speak on behalf of Sub. H. B. No. 308. It seems appropriate to have this hearing today as this week is the 46th Annual National EMS Week and last week the 58th Annual National Police Week. A time where the country takes the opportunity to pause, recognize and salute our First Responders: Our Policemen, our Firemen and our Paramedics & EMT's who are out there on the front lines protecting you. Saluting the men and women who have given their lives, while others continue to give of themselves today without question. It's time we as a society do the same to protect them.

I ask you all to show your support for Sub. H. B. No. 308.

Thank you,

David Jockers
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