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House Criminal Justice Committee – HB 44 Testimony

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Thank you Chair LaRe, Vice Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Leland and Members of the committee for the opportunity to present testimony in support of House Bill 44, which passed this committee and the House during the 133rd General Assembly. Unfortunately, I cannot be there in person as I am travelling out-of-state on business.

I have been a soccer official for 44 years. I am a second-generation soccer official. I started my career when I was 12 years old to spend time with my father. At one time I was the youngest soccer referee in Ohio. In my time as a soccer official, I have managed to travel the country and referee at all levels of the sport from the youth level to professional league games. I have also been fortunate enough to referee games in other Countries. I have developed a reputation as a stern, strict, no non-sense referee. I have had a very rewarding officiating career that has been blemished with several “assault” incidents.

I have been a victim of assault, multiple times, while performing my duties as a soccer referee. I have been grabbed, shoved, punched, poked, verbally threatened, had beer bottles and rocks thrown at me as well as my car(s). These incidents have been perpetrated by both players and spectators. In some of these situations the police were called with no action taken on their part – not even a report. In others, the leagues fined the club and allowed the player to continue to play with no sanctions. There were even some perpetrators that were never identified because witnesses did not want to come forward.

I was about 14 years old, as an assistant referee, I ran from the field to chase the ball and bring it back to the field. After the game, my father yelled at me for doing that he told me to let the players get the ball and do not leave his sight again when the Greeks are playing. The following week I found myself in the same position at the same field, but with a different referee. The Greeks disagreed with a call and a fight broke out. I watched a Greek player go to his car and grab a “tire iron” and chase the referee around the field while trying to hit him with it. I hid in fear under the bleachers hoping no one would find me.

I was 17 years old and refereeing a youth game. The score was 1-0 when I awarded a penalty kick against the winning team. They went crazy! I went to their coach and said that was enough. When I turned to go back to the field they started again, including personal threats against me. I decided to let the losing team take the penalty and then I would stop the game and leave. The player took the kick and the ball hit the goalkeeper, the ball rebounded back to the player who took the original kick and I awarded a goal – the correct decision. I looked up and was in fear for my life when a mob of coaches and spectators ran at me. I froze as I didn’t know what to do. Luckily, there was an off-duty Sheriff’s deputy there who game onto the field and saved me, but not before I was shoved around. I drove home crying and panicked that I did something wrong. I wanted to quit, but thankfully my father and others were there to encourage me to keep going.

Recently, I was refereeing a high school game. With roughly 3 minutes remaining I ejected a player for foul and abusive language in accordance with the National Federation Rules. The team was from Pennsylvania. Afterward, the coach approached me at the middle of the field to ask what I was going to

do in reference to reporting his player because there are differences between States. As we are discussing what I needed to do another adult approached us. When he gets close enough he starts poking me in the chest while calling me “a fucking punk ass bitch” and complaining about why I ejected his son. The coach told him to leave, but he stayed for about another 2 minutes before the home school worked to get him away from me. The other downside of this event is that I had to wait an additional 30-minutes while the spectators cleared out as I did not feel safe leaving not knowing where this parent was. I no longer leave a field or stadium without my cell phone ready to take video or call 911 for help.

Some will argue there is no need for a specific law to protect sport’s officials, but I argue that the soccer field is my classroom. As a soccer referee, I do more than call fouls, award goals and signal directions when the ball leaves the field. As an example, at the High School level, I often engage in conversations with players during the game. I talk to players about grades, their schools and their college plans. I speak about sportsmanship throughout the game. I also try and persuade them to become soccer officials. There is much more to being a sport’s official other than knowing how to blow a whistle!

As the “pandemic” has clearly shown, our society revolves around sports at all levels. There are some people that want to blame someone else for the loss rather than accept it and learn from it, they choose to lash out against the easiest target – the game officials. Sports officials will make mistakes! There is no video replay for most all amateur sports. As an official, you have a split second to make a decision. Even correct calls, as described above, have dire consequences for sports officials. Sports Officials are in a position of authority and as society continues to lash out against authority as with teachers, fire fighters and law enforcement, sports officials suffer from some of the same abuses and need the same specific protections afforded to the other groups under the Ohio Revised Code.

What would we do without sports officials? There are all types of information out there to suggest that there are not enough sports officials and that the more officials are walking away than are joining. I was an assignor for five years and can tell you the problem is real. In one national survey, 53% of officials have felt unsafe or feared for their safety due to the behavior of an administrator, player, coach or spectator. Please refer to www.naso.org/survey/.

I have received many phone calls and emails from people across all sports that are in full support of this legislation. I know there is no “silver bullet” to fix this problem, however I believe that this legislation is a step forward.

In closing, I believe that there is strong support for the passage of House Bill 44 and I encourage each of you to act quickly in passing it. Lastly, I want to thank each of you for your time and the opportunity to provide my written testimony.