



Office of Representative Willis E. Blackshear Jr.

39th House District

Sponsor Testimony – State and Local Government Committee

Thank you, Chairman Wiggam, Vice Chairman John, Ranking Member Kelly, and members of the State and Local Government Committee for giving me the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on House Bill 331.

House Bill 331 would require certain law enforcement officers to wear visible badges or IDs. There is no language currently in the Revised Code that requires police officers to identify themselves via name, badge number, or agency to citizens. However, individual departments may require officers to have visible identification. In 2020, we saw police officers across the nation refuse to identify themselves to protestors verbally and, more importantly, by covering their badges. In addition, there were instances where federal law enforcement officers detained citizens and refused to identify themselves. This is dangerous for both police officers and citizens.

House Bill 331 addresses two central issues with regards to police and citizen interactions: safety and accountability. As mentioned before, police officers refusing to identify themselves is dangerous for citizens and police officers. Individuals pretend to be police officers often. In 2021, in Whitehall, Ohio, a man was arrested for impersonating a police officer. The man had a Crown Victoria with red and blue lights, and he had a fake police badge with a chain and a fully stocked duty belt. In the man's trunk, there was a ballistic vest and an AR-15 style

firearm. In another case in 2021, a state trooper pulled over a man who had a car that was impersonating an undercover police car; the man was not dressed like a police officer but once again had a fake badge. If citizens are unsure as to whether the individual they are interacting with truly is a police officer, how should they know to comply with the individual's orders, and how can they be assured that they are safe? If a citizen believes the individual trying to arrest them is not a police officer, they may try to resist and put the officer in danger.

More than 1/3 of all police departments in the state require their officers to wear body cameras, and this includes major police departments, such as Cleveland, Cincinnati, Columbus, Dayton, the Montgomery County Sheriff's Department, and the Ohio Highway Patrol. The Ohio FOP agrees that body cameras keep officers and civilians safe and provide accountability. The problem with body cameras, however, is that they are expensive, and while more police departments in the State of Ohio will soon be getting body cameras, that still leaves many departments without this necessary safety and accountability-driven machine. In a recent release, Governor DeWine stated that body cameras are a necessary tool for modern policing. If body cameras are a necessary tool for modern policing, then so is proper identification. All police departments give badges. These are already within budget and act as a safety feature while also providing accountability. Should an officer do something wrong, individuals can see their badge number or name and be able to report this back to the officer's department.

There is a precedent for this law. As I mentioned before, police departments within the state of Ohio already have similar requirements. In fact, the federal government recently passed a law requiring federal military and civilian law enforcement personnel involved in a government response to "civil disturbance" to wear visible identification of themselves and the government

entity that is employing them. California has a law that requires police officers to have proper identification too.

A big concern of requiring police officers to wear badges is the work of undercover police officers. It must be noted that this bill excludes officers who are on undercover assignments.

Thank you to the State and Local Government Committee for your time. Representative Smith and I appreciate the opportunity to offer testimony on House Bill 331. At this time, we would be more than happy to take questions.