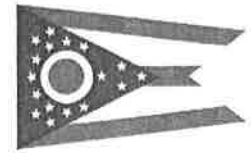




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Testimony on Senate Bill 16

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Senate Judiciary

February 23, 2021

Chairman Manning, Vice-Chair McColley, Ranking Member Thomas, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Mike Weinman; I am a retired Columbus police officer who now serves as the director of government affairs for the FOP. I am here today to give proponent testimony on Senate Bill 16 on behalf of our 26,000 members.

The Fraternal Order of Police of Ohio urges the committee's support of Senate Bill 16. The bill allows for a civil action for law enforcement officer based on a civil rights abridgment or false complaint and certain crimes regarding conduct directed at a law enforcement officer, their family members, or co-workers, at a public emergency. Law enforcement officers have been subjected to Doxing, verbal threats, harassment, and physical attacks with everything from frozen water bottles, stones and bricks, homemade shields, chemical sprays, fireworks, Laser pointers, and a firearm. As a result of the protests/riots that occurred following George Floyd's death, Columbus officers alone filed over 200 OBWC claims for injuries. Had it not been for his Kevlar helmet, a Cincinnati officer may have been killed during a protest/riot when he was shot in the head.

In one incident, 21 Columbus police officers were injured by an individual who launched fireworks at them. That individual had his bail reduced to \$10,000 two weeks ago. Also, I want to draw your attention to an article I have attached to my testimony that appeared in the Columbus Dispatch. The Dispatch interviewed several police officers of color and brought attention to the terrible things that were said to these officers and how they were treated during the protests/riots.

Following the protests/riots, complaints poured into officers' agencies. Complaints against officers became more weaponized during the protest/riots over the spring and summer. Scores of complaints were only intended to harass and intimidate officers. In some cases, complaints against officers came in from persons thousands of miles away based solely on what they had seen on social media. The verbal harassment and attacks on officers weren't confined to downtown streets and squares. It appeared in social media, and some cases followed them home. One officer spoke about how his children became targets of harassment and bullying at school because he is an officer.

The FOP respectfully asks that the committee favorably report SB 16.

Black officers get double dose of pain, frustration

Holly Zachariah hollyzachariah@dispatch.com

He had held the line for hours, never flinching as protesters screamed insults, hurled rocks and frozen water bottles and dared the men and women to take off their uniforms and fight.

Then someone zeroed in on his black skin.

Protesters soon advanced on Columbus police Officer Phillip "P.J." Jackson, circling back to him time and again.

"You're disgusting. You standing on the wrong side," one Black woman shouted in his face. "We stand with our people ... I know you can hear me. I hope you can sleep good at night. Remember my voice, Black man. Remember my voice."

And oh, how he does. The insults hurt, Jackson said, and the personal attacks cut him as surely as a sharp knife.

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Yet that pain only has steeled his resolve for how he can best bring about change from the inside. It reminds him how those who judge him only by his uniform are no better than any officer who judges those they police simply by the color of their skin.

"Because I was a Black officer, I became a focal point and a target," he said. "Not knowing me, not knowing who I am, what I have been through, what I've done in my community and what I still continue to do."

He held his position in that line of officers at the intersection of Broad and High streets Downtown as the agitated crowd swelled to hundreds as the night wore on.

It was Thursday, May 28, the first night of protests in Columbus decrying police brutality and demanding widespread change in the name of George Floyd, who died in Minneapolis after a police officer pinned him down by his neck for more than eight minutes during an arrest on minor charges.

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And it was a night like no other Jackson has experienced in his 14 years with the Columbus Division of Police or as a state corrections officer or as part of a U.S. Marshal's task force before that.

Sure, he has had his blackness used against him before and yes, people on the streets as he works his mid-watch shift have questioned his loyalty. But he said he's always been able to talk to people, to show them who he really is and what he stands for, what his colleagues stand for.

These are his streets, after all. This is where he came from, having grown up in the Linden neighborhood and then spending 20-plus years as a youth football coach there.

But this? This one May night and all the nights that have followed? They are different.

“It hurts,” the 46-year-old Jackson said. He knows deep in his bones that he can, in fact, be a Black man and wear police blue at the same time. It shouldn’t require him to split his loyalties.

He said he is as angry about what police did to Floyd as the people marching through the city, but he has never been ashamed to be a Black police officer. And he isn’t now.

“I knew what was happening to that man on the ground,” he said of Floyd. “Yes, I felt that pain. But ... separating your Blackness from the uniform? You’re gonna be Black regardless. You can’t turn that off.”

The Columbus Division of Police — both its commanders and the rank and file — is mostly white. It has one recently-promoted Black commander, and out of 56 lieutenants, four are Black. Of the city’s 1,560 officers, about 10% are Black, and 20 of 224 sergeants are Black.

The city has faced discrimination and racism lawsuits in the past, and a report from a consulting group released in August found that the division has a “significant disparity of use of force against minority residents.” As recently as last month, Lt. Melissa McFadden, a 24-year veteran of the division, said she believes the racism she sees exhibited by officers on the street is a symptom of the internal racism at work.

Census data from 2019 lists 28.5% of Columbus’ population as Black or African American. Increasing diversity in the police force so that it looks more like the community the division serves has long been a priority, and Detective Dana Croom, who joined in 1987, has been a part of those efforts.

>> Related story: Black police officers few in Columbus, most central Ohio suburbs

Croom, 55, said it’s not like it was when he first came on, when older officers pointed out who among them were blatantly racist and who he should avoid. But even though it was difficult internally back then, he had never once thought about quitting — until the past 30 days. Then the doubts about staying until his planned retirement next year crept in.

The personal attacks on his heritage, the calling into question his ability to be both an officer and a Black man, have been difficult, Croom said. The assumptions that every officer is racist are unfair and wrong, he said.

Croom was drawn to law enforcement by experience. As a child growing up in New York City, he and a friend were approached by a stranger who offered them some candy if they’d go with him. A young Dana declined and went home; his friend did not. The friend was killed.

Prompted in part by such traumatic events, the Crooms moved to central Ohio. His father became a longtime Licking County deputy sheriff and sergeant, and Dana Croom followed his footsteps into law enforcement.

Croom has seen plenty of protests on Columbus streets, but he said there’s been nothing like this past month or so.

“I’ve been shot at, I’ve been shot, and I can honestly tell you that that first Saturday was probably the scariest I’ve ever been,” he said. “Normally, the police take control. But not that day.”

At 55, he has been among the oldest to don the tactical gear and work the front lines of the protests. And Croom, too, took plenty of personal barbs.

"Uncle Tom," he said. "I get that a lot."

Croom said he sees the frustration and anger on the faces of the protesters. And he understands it. But as a longtime homicide detective, he wonders why the community doesn't seem to call for answers to everyday killings, especially for the young Black men claimed by street violence. He wonders why society doesn't try harder to address that.

"Black lives matter all the time," he said. "Not just when the police do something."

After nearly 32 years with the division, Officer Jacqueline Fofana recently has been called back to the front lines, too. Working now as a child-abuse investigator, she has long been a diversity instructor at the police academy and takes an active role in hiring recruits.

She has always thought that part of her responsibility was to help bring about change.