



**State Representative Cindy Abrams
District 29**

**State Representative Brian Baldridge
District 90**

**HB 545 – Sponsor Testimony
House Committee
2021**

Rep. Baldridge

Chair Hillyer, Vice Chair Grendell, Ranking Member Galonski, and members of the House Civil Justice Committee, thank you for giving Representative Abrams and I the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on House Bill 545.

Peer Support Teams are a collaboration of first responders, both active and retired, including; correction officers, dispatchers, emergency medical technicians, firefighters, and law enforcement officers focused on improving the mental health of first responders and family members. They are registered with the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation (ICISF), and are currently providing preventative measures such as Resiliency Training, Peer Support, Critical Incident Response, and Critical Incident Stress Management. Local departments may also choose to have peer support teams work with a medical advisor to ensure they had proper training and were properly providing peer support services.

However, many do not take advantage of their services because there is no ensured confidentiality. A key component to any successful mental health program is trust and confidence. This is especially true for first responders due to stigma, concerns of litigation and the culture of a family atmosphere.

Constantly experiencing these stressful situations will lead to trauma and mental health issues if not addressed. Mental health is a serious concern among our first responders, who experience suicide at a rate 2-3 times higher than traditional line of duty deaths.

This legislation will ensure confidentiality for our first responders who are seeking out peer support. By allowing Peer Support Teams to provide the security of confidentiality laws, more First Responders will seek out much needed help and lives will be saved. Following Rep. Abrams' testimony, we will be glad to stand for questions.

Rep. Abrams

This legislation will play a crucial role in protecting and supporting our first responders by allowing privileged communications between a peer support team member and an individual receiving peer support services or advice from the team member.

Our first responders put not only their lives, but their mental health at risk every day to do their jobs and serve their communities. They are the first ones to the scenes of critical incidents and high stress situations where they must remain calm and be the voice of reason to de-escalate the situation.

You all have the bill and analysis, so I will focus on the highlights. HB 545 does the following:

- It requires a peer support team member to receive no less than 16 hours of basic peer support training and, to maintain confidential testimonial privileges, the team member must complete no less than 8 hours of basic peer support training every two years;
- Under the bill, peer support team members is an individual who satisfies one of the following:
 - An active or retired a peace officer, firefighter, emergency medical worker, corrections officer, or dispatcher. Retired individuals must receive approval from their former employer;
 - Or a civilian employee working with one of these entities;
- Peer support team members provide services to individuals with similar life experiences;
- The bill allows organizations to appoint a peer support advisor to ensure the team member are appropriately trained and providing proper services. This advisor must be one of the following:
 - An individual who is licensed to practice medicine and has successfully completed residency training in psychiatry;
 - A licensed psychologist;
 - A clinical nurse specialist or practitioner who is credentialed in psychiatric-mental health;
 - A licensed clinical counselor;
 - Or a licensed counselor;
- It creates a legal confidentiality requirement for peer support team members, prohibiting them from testifying on the content of their private conversations unless the conversation presents a danger to the first responder, corresponds with a crime, indicates child abuse or neglect, or if express permission is given;

- And, finally, many organizations in Ohio are already utilizing peer support teams. This bill empowers these groups to continue to appoint peer support team members to standing groups, while creating a standardized framework of qualifications for these members.

In the coming weeks, you will hear from the experts. Men and women who have made it their life's work to provide comprehensive support to our first responders. These folks will be able to share the real-life impacts of reforming and enhancing Ohio's peer support system.

Thank you again for your time, and we would be happy to take any questions.