



Ohio Association of Professional Fire Fighters

140 E Town St., Suite 1225; Columbus OH 43215

Michael P. Taylor, President

William E. Quinn, Secretary/Treasurer

Jim Carney, Director of Governmental Affairs

April 3, 2022

Chairman Hillyer, Vice Chair Grendell, Ranking Member Galonski and Members of the House Civil Justice committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.

My name is Matt Askea, and I am a full-time lieutenant firefighter and paramedic for the City of Akron Fire Department with over 17 years of experience. I have also been the clinical coordinator for the Ohio Association of Professional Firefighters Peer Support Team for the past 5 years. In addition to being a firefighter, I have also been a licensed professional counselor in the state of Ohio for 18 years.

I am writing to express my complete support of HB 545, which would allow privileged communication between peer supporters and first responders. According to a 2018 SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) report, it is estimated that 30 percent of first responders develop behavioral health conditions including depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as compared with 20 percent in the general population (Abbot et al., 2015). That is 1 in 3 first responders. In an effort to address this statistic, there has been a movement towards a system of peer support to provide assistance when someone is showing signs of a mental health issue.

Peer support does not replace professional counseling or services, but it can be a bridge between these and the first responder. It is often making that first phone call to ask for help that prevents people from receiving mental health assistance. Because peer supporters are colleagues with the same experiences and there is often a rapport built already, many first responders are more willing to accept help from their peers. For many first responders, peer support reduces the stigma of mental health support and treatment. Since mentally healthy first responders are essential for a community's wellbeing, it is imperative that we provide mental health support in a manner that encourages the greatest participation among them with the fewest barriers to prevent participation.



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Many first responders are wary of discussing personal problems without the protection of “privileged communication” status. This distinction may seem small to some of you, but it is a major difference that can prevent first responders from receiving the help they need in a timely manner. Peer-support programs have emerged as standard best practice for first responders as it meets the goal of caring for employees, as well as addressing multiple barriers to standard care including stigma, lack of time, poor access to providers, lack of trust, and fear of job repercussions (Creamer et al., 2012). HB 545 will provide the protection needed to reduce these barriers and make mental health treatment more readily available.

As a first responder in a large city department as well as a licensed clinician/mental health counselor and peer supporter, I have seen the benefit of first responder peer support firsthand and I can tell you that it has definitely saved lives. Passing HB 545 will make peer support communication safer for first responders, which will allow us to further save lives and support these valuable community assets as they support you.

Very Respectfully,

Matt Askea, M.A., LPC
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Akron Fire Department
OAPFF Peer Support Team Clinical Coordinator