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**House Civil Justice Committee
House Bill 545
Proponent Testimony
April 5, 2022**

Chairman Hillyer, Vice Chair Grendell, Ranking Member Galonski, and members of the House Civil Justice Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 545. My name is Steve Kelly and I am the Chief of Miami Township Fire and Emergency Medical Services in Clermont County. I am testifying this afternoon on behalf of the Ohio Fire Chiefs' Association in my role as Chair of the Policy Committee. The OFCA strongly supports House Bill 545 because we recognize that peer support teams are an important tool in assisting first responders cope with the stress and trauma experienced on the job.

I would like to start with a brief story of a 19- year old volunteer firefighter who had just begun working for his local fire department and had recently completed his entry level fire training program. Like every other kid who finally got the chance to do his dream job, he was always excited to hear the tones activate in the station, to dress out in his turnout gear, and to climb onto the truck to make the call, regardless of what that might be. One of his very first major incidents involved a head on collision between two vehicles on one of the local major roadways. Upon arrival, he exited the back of the rescue truck he had been riding in and saw something he had never experienced before. Paramedics had already arrived on the scene and determined that the driver and passenger in one car were already dead. There was a mother and two children in the backseat of that same car and the mother was screaming in pain and sorrow with both of her legs broken and one of her ankles almost completely amputated as she had been sitting in the middle seat in the back. The impact forced both her legs under the two front seats.

The other vehicle involved was a small pickup truck with a male driver and his dog in the passenger seat. Unfortunately, that gentleman was not wearing a seatbelt and had been partially ejected through the front windshield, then pulled back into the car when it bounced back. His facial injuries were extensive but he was still standing and trying to scream through the blood and trauma to the bottom half of his face. The paramedics worked quickly to try to control his airway, suction the blood, and help him breathe. By the time the air medical helicopter had arrived, he had gone into a traumatic cardiac arrest that he would not survive. His poor dog was unable to walk with his rear legs as he had sustained a spinal cord injury and would ultimately need to be put down.

I only share this with you because that 19-year old firefighter was me and now I am a 46-year old fire chief with over 26 years of experiencing calls like this, and some much worse. I have found ways to work through them, to drive them down into areas where I can control my reaction to them or to just avoid them so I can move on and focus on other things that need to be done. Sometimes, these calls come back to me in strange times when I least expect them to come into my mind. I often fear what might lie ahead for me in the later years of my life when I am retired and have more time to process these things. Peer support teams, their programs, and the resources that they have access to will undoubtedly be able to help me and other first responders deal with the horrors of our jobs when the need arises.

Unfortunately, the culture in both the fire service and law enforcement has often led to first responders internalizing incident related stress . Many first responders are reluctant to share their struggles because of implications of being weak, and potential job implications if they indicate they have suicidal thoughts. HB 545 addresses these concerns by making the communications between a first responder and a peer support team member confidential with a few important exceptions.

Peer support is a way to help first responders stay mentally fit and ready to serve our communities. HB 545 will help to allow privileged communications between team members and will help to eliminate the stigma associated with behavioral health issues. It will also allow more people to have access to professional behavioral health services who previously might not have sought that type of support since they would now have a peer support liaison that could assist them with identifying a path toward receiving further assistance.

Under HB 545 Communication between personnel and Peer Support Team members is confidential except in a few different circumstances, including:

- The individual provides information revealing risk of harm to self or others.
- The individual waives his/her right to confidentiality.
- The individual provides information of criminal activity or intended criminal activity (e.g., a crime against another person or a threat to public safety).
- The individual reveals an intent to defraud or deceive an investigation of an incident.

HB545 ensures that peer support team members receive the proper training – mandating 16-hours of initial peer support training and 8-hours of continuing education every two years to qualify for the confidentiality provisions of the bill. It also requires that peer support team members have a sponsorship or affiliation with an organization or association that can validate their training requirements and their individual knowledge, skills, and ability to serve in this crucial role.

With fewer individuals entering the first responder workforce, it is more important than ever to support and retain our existing workforce. Peer support can help extend the longevity of an employee's career and make them more engaged with their employing agency. It will help the employee find ways to process what they have experienced, regardless of the amount of time they have served their community and it will make them stronger to continue their dedicated service.

Thank you once again Chairman Hillyer and members of the committee for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 545 today. The OFCA appreciates Representatives Abrams and Baldrige for their leadership in sponsoring this important legislation. At this time, I will be glad to answer any questions you have.