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**House Civil Justice Committee  
House Bill 545  
Interested Party  
May 9, 2022**

Chairman Hillymer, Vice Chair Grendell, Ranking Member Galonski, and members of the House Civil Justice Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony with respect to House Bill 545. My name is Rick Skilliter and I am a Certified Prevention Specialist (OCPS) in the State of Ohio. My previous occupations for 27 years was full-time law enforcement, 12 of which were as Chief of Police. More directly, I have been involved in public safety for 37 years and participated in peer support for 30 or so years. My primary role is to facilitate training and regional support for peer support, including the spectrum from individual support to debriefing and referral to clinical services.

I would like to applaud those who have supported the development of this bill that provides an outlet for protected conversation with those first responders impacted by life's events. Every professional organization has endorsed some level of peer support and proper training for those providing supportive discussion. The addition of protected speech will likely enhance buy-in and utilization.

I would respectfully like to point out some observations that I believe would provide for more comprehensive and inclusive utilization of the concept of peer support. Again, I fully see the public safety application and need, but I believe you have an opportunity to identify and address additional "first responders" not currently addressed by this legislation as written.

My first observation is the proposed legislation identifies current or retired public safety personnel, but does not allow for other occupations such as medical/allied health, educators, or clinicians. In the face of mass acts of violence, there would no doubt be public safety officials who could benefit from support, but there also would likely be school staff, hospital / allied health, or even members of the general public impacted. This legislation seems to limit the protection only to public safety and those other disciplines would not be eligible to receive protected peer support from within their ranks. This would be a glaring gap in service to a community reeling from tragedy.

My next observation is at line 123. The proposed legislation allows for LPCC and LPC, but fails to mention independently licensed social workers (LISW). Both are master's level clinicians, but the bill leaves the second classification out. With Ohio (and the nation) experiencing such a shortage of clinicians, it would seem prudent to open the field of qualified clinicians to assist programs.

Further, there are many forms of peer support and manners of organization. For example, medium to large agencies may have an internal program, while smaller (rural) areas of the state are served collaboratively by regional programs. Some programs are organized by mental health boards, some are private non-profits, while others may be affiliated with hospital systems. Most of the teams are volunteer. Line 62 says "An employer." Lines 65-68 speak to charitable organizations. This legislation appears to exclude those voluntary groups providing peer support on a local or regional level.

Lastly, there is no mention or allowance of spouses of (insert the discipline) to be trained, included, or to receive protection guarantees. In this arena, we are more and more encouraging healthy outlets, which includes a stable family/home life. In order to serve those spouses, it is incumbent to have a holistic team capable of providing support not only to the peer, but also to their loved one.

Again, this is an incredible effort to further support public safety officers. I, however, believe if you are going to create language, it should allow for more comprehensive support to all who may be impacted by a tragedy. The state will be better served if we can reach a broader cross section with peer support, supportive conversations, and assistance when significant incidents / stress occurs. The opportunity exists to create a safe mechanism for peers who have been impacted by some stressor to have an outlet for protected conversation and support. By excluding the aforementioned groups, I would anticipate somewhere in the future the legislature will be asked to consider protections for those I've mentioned, and thus having to expend time and energy to revisit the topic.

Thank you for taking the time to read this testimony. I appreciate the work of those who have worked with, and provided insight to, Representatives Abrams and Baldrige on this legislation. Please feel free to contact me at my email of [rskilliter@passaah.org](mailto:rskilliter@passaah.org) if you would like any further dialogue or information.

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