



**State Representative Cindy Abrams  
District 29**

**State Representative Brian Baldrige  
District 90**

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

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**Rep. Baldrige**

Chair Manning, Vice Chair McColley, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, thank you for giving Representative Abrams and I the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on House Bill 545.

We have a duty to serve the folks who serve and protect us. Peer supports services is just part of the way in which we can help our first responders. Peer support is provided after a first responder experiences a difficult situation in the field that leaves a lasting mental or physical impact. We want to find a way to help alleviate these stressors on our active duty service men and women.

House Bill 545 makes sure that our first responders feel comfortable sharing with their peers the difficulties they have faced. The bill would accomplish this by generally prohibiting a peer support team member from sharing another member's personal details. This practice will now allow for our first responders to share their stories without fear.

This legislation would require an appointed peer support team advisor to create and overlook a member roster for that team. This roster would keep track of whether or not members are in compliance with the necessary training requirements for the testimonial privilege established by the bill.

Thanks you for your time. I would now like to turn it over to the joint sponsor, Representative Abrams, for further comment.

**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 these dire situations.

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, a peer support team member is an individual who satisfies one of the following:
  - An active or retired 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. They aren't meant to replace licensed counselor or therapists, but to provide immediate support to coworkers in crisis;
- The bill allows organizations to appoint a peer support advisor to provide recommendations on training curriculum, as well as ensure the team members 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;

I believe you should all have an amendment in front of you that seeks to add Licensed Social Workers and Licensed Independent Social Workers to the list of possible peer support advisors. Social workers have extensive training in mental health support and are experienced in helping individuals weather emotional conflict. Social workers already play an important role in training and supporting peer support teams and Rep. Baldrige and I believe their inclusion as peer support team advisors is necessary and

common-sense. Many peer support groups have asked for this amendment and we hope it will be accepted during HB 545's next hearing.

- Continuing, HB 545 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.

While in the House Civil Justice Committee, we spoke with stakeholders and included two additional amendments at the request of the Ohio Prosecuting Attorneys Association.

The first requires each peer support team to maintain a roster of their peer support team members, including the team member's name and confirmation they have satisfied the training requirements to receive testimonial privileges. To ensure the personal information of these individuals is protected, this roster is exempt from Public Records Law. However, the employing body of the peer support team is required to provide the roster to a prosecutor, investigator, or other individual with a legal right or duty to determine whether testimonial privilege may apply.

The second amendment addresses OPAA's concern of de facto confidentiality and conflicts of interest. This is best explained with an example.

If two on duty officers arrive at the scene of a critical stress incident and one is peer support trained, under the "As Introduced" version of the bill, that peer support trained officer may be able to claim all conversations conducted with the other officer at the scene are privileged.

To ensure that proper investigations are conducted, an amendment was added that requires a peer support member to be appointed and dispatched to provide peer support services at the scene of the incident. That individual will be the only peer support member that has testimonial privilege over the conversations that happen at the scene. This amendment only applies at the scene of a critical stress incident.

Both amendments were accepted without objection and the bill was unanimously voted out of committee and off the House floor.

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.