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**Senate Judiciary Committee
House Bill 545
Proponent Testimony
Deputy Chief Rick Vober, Akron Fire Department
December 13, 2022**

Chairman Manning, Vice Chair McColley, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 545.

I am Rick Vober and I serve as Deputy Chief for the Akron Fire Department and the Vice President of the Ohio Fire Chiefs' Association. In my thirty-five years of public service, I have witnessed unspeakable violent incidents, tragic civilian fire loss, and have lost several first responder friends to suicide and line of duty deaths. Unfortunately, my experiences are not unique

In 2019, there was 189 police/ firefighter line of duty deaths. What is even more staggering is the three hundred and fifty-eight suicides in the same year. Peer support teams were designed to help with incident related stress and was expanded to address personal issues for first responders.

First responders have always tended to keep incident related stress to themselves. Not managing stress appropriately can and has led to many personal issues including increased alcohol and drug use, anger issues, and divorce just to name a few. Many first responders are cautious about sharing because of implications of being weak, and potential job loss if they share what they are going through.

Peer support is a way to help first responders stay mentally fit and ready to serve our community. H.B. 545 will help to allow privileged communications between team members and will help to eliminate the stigma associated with behavioral health issues.

House Bill 545 is not just the wish of a few in the state. This legislation was developed with the help of a broad coalition of first responders including the Ohio Fire Chiefs' Association, the Ohio Association of Professional Firefighters, the Ohio State Firefighters Association, Ohio Association of Chiefs of Police, the Buckeye State Sheriffs Association, Ohio EMS Chiefs Association, Ohio Chapter of the Association of Public Safety Communications Officials, and the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction.

First responders have always been here to serve in good times and in bad, now is a time when you can give back. Please support House Bill 545. Thank you, Chairman Manning and members of the committee, for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 545 today. At this time, I will be happy to try to answer any questions you have.