

Chief Tom Wells

House Bill 545

Proponent Testimony

December 12, 2022

Chairman Manning, Vice Chairman McColley, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee:

I have been the City of Springdale Police Chief for almost three years and a law enforcement officer for 33 years. My experience as Chief after our line of duty death showed me the importance of peer support in the years since that fateful night. Thank you for allowing me to share my experience of that night and the impact it has had on our department.

It doesn't matter if you are a police officer, a fire fighter, a dispatcher, a corrections officer, or any other first responder, this job takes a toll on you. For many first responders, they don't know why they feel the way they do, or they may not recognize that they have changed, but the people around see the changes. It is important to seek help. Treatment works and people do recover. In the months that followed Kaia's death, we did not know where to get that help.

On the night of Kaia's death, one the first officers on the scene and one of her best friends, held her artery closed while tying the tourniquet to stop the bleeding. This is a sight and feeling he will never be able to unto in his mind. He met her at the hospital. He was there when he learned that Kaia had not made it. Two months later, when this former Army Ranger Captain disappeared into the farms around Ross Township Hamilton County because he could not deal with his pain, I knew I needed to figure out the resources that could help my department.

We have a regional peer support team that reached out to me. They had vetted clinical resources, trained peer supporters and were establishing a program with a local in-patient mental health facility.

My officer received the care he needed to recover and now he is a thriving member of our departments and a member of Hamilton County's Dive Team.

A few months later, I realized the sound of helicopters, the high-pitched whoosh that cut through the thundering engine and the wind gust off the propellers would take me back to that night. Standing in front of any group of people became a flashback to that night when I had to tell our employees and the department what had happened to Kaia. I relived the emotions, the feeling in the pit of my stomach, the tunnel vision, the emptiness as if it was happening all over again.

There are many things that are destructive about PTSD. There are many symptoms of PTSD that are destructive to our jobs. First Responders in our departments, our region and our state don't often talk about their pain.

I wasn't prepared for the effect this would have on me, nor my department. I didn't know how to get help for myself or my department, but I do now. The Tri-State Peer Support Team showed us how to access clinical care. They shared vetted resources for in-patient and outpatient care. They worked with our EAP to allow our department members access to free mental health counseling.

The Peer Support Legislation protects conversations first responders may have with a trained peer supporter. This means people can get help earlier before it is a crisis. First responders can ask for help getting connected to resources before someone is suicidal. In a department, peers can acknowledge that the motor vehicle accident with three fatalities was a difficult run and they can check-in on people during or after a shift.

Peer Support can be prevention and early intervention and crisis response. We have prevention for diabetes and heart issues. We don't wait for a crisis before we intervene or seek medical help. This legislation will increase peer support in departments. Passage of this bill will immediately enhance the lives of Ohio's first responders. Current legislation provides limited privileged communication to some peer support teams. This legislation allows for the development of peer support teams in any department. The requirements can be met by any size

department and implementation will allow teams to meet the needs of their department. The bill will encourage conversations with a trained peer support person and studies show conversations with a peer supporter reduce stigma, reduce stress, share vetted effective resources, and improve morale. They also save careers, save marriages, and save relationships with children.

Thank you again for allowing me to provide testimony and I hope you will support Ohio's First Responders by passing this bill.

Chief Tom Wells

City of Springdale Police Department