



House Homeland Security Committee  
House Bill 84  
March 29, 2023

Opponent Testimony  
Written Only

Elaine Schleiffer, co-founder, REACH NEO

To Chair Ghanbari, Vice Chair Plummer, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the Homeland Security Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in opposition of House Bill 84, which would reduce the minimum age requirement for individuals entering law enforcement careers from 21 years of age to 18 years of age.

My name is Elaine and I live on the west side of Cleveland. I am an advocate for expanded crisis services for folks in behavioral health crisis, and I advocate for that because I have needed those services myself. I am “dual diagnosis,” which means I have both a mental illness diagnosis, as well as a substance use disorder diagnosis. I want to tell you firsthand that behavioral health symptoms are a reflection of health disruption, not personality. People like me deserve the same respect and equality from law enforcement officers as you yourself do.

For folks who don’t work in the behavioral health field, the symptoms of behavioral health disorders can be startling. Symptoms of behavioral health distress or disruption can include emotional and verbal outbursts, repetitive physical movements, agitation, anxiety, self-harming behaviors, and paranoia.

If I started exhibiting those behaviors right now—if I started screaming, rocking back and forth, failing to respond to what others were saying to me, or being erratic and unpredictable in my reactions—you would all feel anxious, both for your own safety and for mine. Some of you might even choose to call in the police who work here in the Statehouse in hopes that your safety and mine could be protected.

Let's say that you do call the police for help, and let's say that the officers who answer that call are 19 and 20 years old. At that age, those police officers are still experiencing brain development. The final years of brain development primarily impact executive function, which includes our skills at weighing complex factors, making tough decisions, problem solving, and impulse control. So the police officers answering your call are disadvantaged by their age biologically. And they have less life experience, fewer opportunities to have interacted with people like me in the past, and less experience witnessing severe mental health symptoms, addiction or withdrawal symptoms, and the impacts of trauma and PTSD on behavior.

In this scenario, these young police officers are likely to be scared of me, because my behavior is startling and off-putting. They are likely to not know how to process that fear, because their brains are still developing, and very part of the brain that is still developing is the executive function, which would help them navigate the fight-or-flight instincts that they experience in this encounter. So in this scenario, do you think that you are setting those police officers up for success? In this scenario, do you think that you are setting me up for a successful de-escalation? Do you think that I will even live through this encounter?

I have had young officers respond to my own crisis situations in the past. I have seen them be less experienced and less comfortable talking to me or others in crisis. I have seen them not be sure of how to make eye contact with me, how to speak directly to me, how to manage their own emotional reactions, and how to guide a situation toward a successful de-escalation. I do not believe it is the fault of these young officers that they do not have these skills. I do believe a lack of experience, training, and support creates situations in which neither the police officers nor the community members are satisfied with the outcomes of crisis response.

The Washington Post has found that 25% of people who are shot and killed by police officers suffer from acute mental illness at the time of their death. According to the Treatment Advocacy Center, people with untreated mental illness are 16 times more likely to be killed during a police encounter than other people approached by law enforcement. These statistics are the result of police officers being asked to be first responders for behavioral health situations they are not trained for, and do not understand. Let's not add first responders who are not done with their own brain development to the list of causes of tragedies in our communities.

**Please help people like me make sure that we live through our next encounter with the police.**

**I ask you to VOTE NO on HB 84.**

Thank you,

Elaine Schleiffer  
Co-founder, REACH