

Friday, October 13, 2023

Chairman Adam Mathews
Ohio House Pension Committee
RE: H.B. 261 (EMS Workers), Proponent

Chairman Mathews, Vice Chair King, Ranking Member Lightbody and members of the Ohio House Pensions Committee, I thank you for the opportunity to present my testimony on this important piece of legislation to make emergency medical service first responders to be labeled as “public safety officers” under the Ohio Public Employees Retirement System.

My name is David Jockers and I am a Paramedic with the City of Cleveland, Division of EMS. I apologize that I am not there in person today as I am currently working in the City. With the current staffing shortage plaguing emergency medical agencies around the country, it is difficult for any of us on the front line to take time off as we are needed to support and serve the public in their time of need. However, I write this in support of H.B. 261.

Many of you have heard some of the horrors and of the stress which is involved in being an EMS First Responder. The stories, the nightmares, the images carried – many buried. The struggles with addiction, with spouses, with family, with depression. I am not necessarily writing you here today to relive my worst nightmares since becoming a Paramedic for the Division, although I do have them. I am writing you to tell you how I find myself at times – as an outsider looking in on the world of EMS and first responding. An outsider witnessing fewer and fewer people wanting to become EMT’s and Paramedics.

A little more about myself – I just turned 53 years old this year. One might think that I had a long and difficult career as a Paramedic for the Division, however that is not completely the case. In fact, I’ve been with the Division for only 9 years; and have been a Paramedic for only 11 years. Prior to this I had a successful 21-year career working in the media, in broadcast radio in Cleveland. However, with the downsizing of the media over the last 2 decades, like so many others I found myself looking for work. How I became a Paramedic I still don’t fully understand, but I do know that one path lead me to another and then another and the next thing I knew, I was putting myself through intense pre-hospital medical training and before long I found myself on the streets of Cleveland working as a paramedic at 44 years old.

I’m 13 years removed from the media now with 9 of them working on the inner-city streets of Cleveland. At times I find myself observing my peers from a journalist’s perspective. Observing and wishing I had an outlet to share what I’ve seen – which is what I’m trying to do with you here today. I’ve witnessed firsthand my co-workers’ struggles, their silent (and verbal) pleas for help – and yet I’ve also observed their resilience to fight back and never give up – thinking that they’re invulnerable. I observe them while knowing full well that *everyone* eventually reaches a breaking point. That point where they themselves will need support, because working for 32 years in this field to be able to retire is hard on the body and mind. This is the point where this legislation is desperately needed.

This is why I joined our peer support team, to offer my own life experiences and to provide emotional support for my co-workers as they journey down this long 32-year path. However, I now realize that so much more is needed, including lowering the number of years needed to retire – matching the number of years needed by our peers in police and fire – and this important legislation is just that.

Surely, in my short 9 years on the street I’ve seen my share of horrors. I’ve seen death and dying; I’ve witnessed the peaceful passing of an elder family member and have also witnessed the tragic death of a teenager who was gunned down in gang violence. I’ve listened to the pleas of family members begging us to save their loved one – voices and memories that scar you and we carry around forever. At times I’ve wondered if I did enough to save someone’s life; or if I had done something differently, would it have made a difference. I worked the

day a co-worker took his own life from the stresses of his life. As a newer employee at the time, I remember thinking, "Is this what happens to us?"

A few years ago, my partner and I brought back a co-worker's father who went into cardiac arrest and died; and under very extreme circumstances we brought him back. This is a man who was my own age and yet is back to work today. Back with his family. While this ended well, the circumstances and stress of this call, I will carry forever as one of the most difficult situations I've ever been in my life.

In recent years I've seen the terror in the eyes of the public when we show up at their home – deathly afraid that they or their loved one has COVID, or that they're going to get it and die despite our assurances. There is no doubt in my mind that the fears of the pandemic have had a drastic negative impact on the ability for cities like Cleveland to recruit and retain EMT's and Paramedics. Which again is why this legislation is so important – as a 25-year retirement is certainly more attractive to current and potential employees.

These are memories and images that are difficult at times to process as a middle-aged man. I could not imagine what it's like for someone half my age and who grew up in a much different world and time than the committee members and I did. I find myself looking at my co-workers, many of whom are far younger than I am however have been on the streets 2-3x longer than I have. I think about all that they have seen and been a part of. I think about the very senior co-workers who are my own age and have been here for nearly 3 decades – and how they were taught to "suck it up" and move on – to repress their feelings and the memories of what they've seen – mostly because there is limited support and that they have to do it for 32 years.

Since my career "reboot" I've heard it from many on how they couldn't imagine starting over – let alone doing what I do; I've heard that common question of how they bet I've seen some "crazy things." Yes, I have. And as an outsider who is now an insider, I cannot believe there is such limited emotional and financial support for those we trust with our lives, while requiring them to work 28% more years than our police and fire peers. EMS first responders are literally sacrificing their own health and well-being over 32 years for complete strangers.

A few years ago, I trained a cadet who worked all day with us. She graduated high school the year before. She was 18 years old – less than a year older than my own son at the time. She became an EMT through the Division and was working her way through the academy to join us out on the streets. During our shift she was telling us about all the "trauma" she's already been involved in. Shootings, car accidents, death and dying. My journalist mind kicked in and I started to think about the groundwork which was being laid in this young cadet's world. So young and impressionable and yet facing such a long time before she would be able to retire, all-the-while having such a limited support system for her for when she needs it... and she will.

It's no secret that the nation is seeing a trend away from those seeking to become First Responders. This trend has caused agencies across the country to recruit older people like me, as well as younger people like my cadet. While she will have to work an extra-long and hard career, I've already accepted the fact that I will never be able to retire under the current OPERS retirement requirements. For the simple reason that I will have to do it until I'm 67 years old. That's just not going to happen. In fact, more and more of the staffing at Cleveland EMS have been hired at the age of 35 and older and all of us will be required to work until we are 67 years old. That is nearly impossible to do in this line of work. The stress of the job on our mind and bodies just won't allow it. We need to do more to recruit and retain these critically needed EMS first responders. This legislation achieves just that. I'm witnessing this firsthand as a one-time outsider now looking in.

Members of the Committee, I thank you again for this opportunity to speak on behalf of H.B. 261 and ask you all to show your support.

Thank you,

David Jockers
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