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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB736
Police Officers- Mental Health- Employee Assistance Program

Judiciary Committee
February 25, 2020

Chair Clippinger, Vice-Chair Atterbeary and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you on HB736, Police Officers- Mental Health- Employee Assistance Program. The purpose of this bill to require each law enforcement agency to develop and implement an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) which shall provide police officers with confidential mental health services including: counseling services; crisis counseling; stress management counseling; mental health evaluations; and peer support services.

In October of 2019, Montgomery County Police Officer, Thomas TJ Bomba on top of a parking garage took his own life. Like Officer Bomba, 1 in 4 police officers has thoughts of suicide at some point in their life. Law enforcement officers respond to and witness some of the most tragic events that happen in our communities. On-the-job stress can have a significant impact on their physical and mental well-being, which can accumulate over the course of a career. Cumulative Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), manifests over time, resulting from multiple stress-related experiences. When untreated, officers can become a risk to themselves and others. Many officers struggle with alcohol abuse, depression, suicidal thoughts, posttraumatic stress disorder and other challenges.

Despite the prevalence of mental health issues amongst law enforcement, there is a stigma around getting help. Many officers view asking for help as a sign of weakness or that if they acknowledge that they have a problem with mental health then something is “wrong” with them. Many fear that talking about their struggles or seeking help will result in stigma from fellow officers, career setbacks or the shame of having their weapons removed.

Implementing an EAP allows for officers to seek and receive the treatment they need on a voluntary and confidential basis without fear of shame and stigma. With programs

such as this we can provide our officers with help while hopefully changing and, more importantly, reducing the stigma associated with mental health.

Recognizing the need to address the significant daily exposure to trauma experienced by officers and the negative effects that the trauma can have on an Officer, several steps have been taken.

On a federal level, The Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act of 2017 (LEMHWA) was signed into law in January of 2018. This law provides funding for peer mentoring programs, designed to enable law enforcement officers to get help from those who truly understand their experiences- their law enforcement colleagues. This Act recognizes that law enforcement agencies need and deserve support in their ongoing efforts to protect the mental health and well-being of their officers. Good mental health and psychological health is just as essential as good physical health for law enforcement officers to be effective in keeping our country and our communities safe from crime and violence.

On a state level, Chapter 519 (2016 HB1016) developed standards to require mandatory psychological evaluations of a law enforcement officer who was actively involved in an incident when another person was seriously injured or killed as a result of an accident or shooting or has returned from combat deployment. HB736 compliments already existing provisions and does replace those mandatory requirements.

Several agencies including Baltimore City and Harford County are leading the way and have already established EPA's. This bill allows these programs to be statewide so all officers can be afforded the same measures to address their mental health in a proactive and holistic manner.

For these reasons, I am requesting a favorable report.

With kindest regards,

Benjamin Brooks