

Testimony
of
Dr. Stephan Podrygula
in favor of
SB No. 2213

Senate Judiciary Committee
Tuesday, January 24, 2023

Chairman Larson and Members of the Committee:

My name is Dr. Stephan Podrygula and I am a clinical and forensic psychologist from Minot, who wishes to ask for your support of Senate Bill 2213, which would appropriate funds to the Attorney General “for the purpose of providing a law enforcement resiliency program grant”.

For the past 45 years, I have worked with law enforcement officers, performing a variety of duties, including the following: therapy and counseling; pre-employment psychological screening; fitness for duty evaluations; training; and consultation. I am an approved psychological provider for the Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) Board, have taught criminal justice students at Minot State University, and have received specialty training in the area of public safety psychology.

Although police work can be very rewarding, it is obviously stressful, with a significant impact on both officers and their families. Burnout, depression, substance abuse, and vicarious traumatization (where an officer becomes traumatized by repeated exposure to very upsetting situations experienced by others) are not uncommon. Their relations with friends and family members can be upset: for example, several years ago, in a conversation with the chief psychologist for the Atlanta Police Department, he told me that a large portion – over 90%, if memory serves me right – of his married officers ended up divorced within five years.

Suicide is perhaps the ultimate risk. In 2021, for example, of 632 officer deaths nationally, nearly ¼ were due to suicide; if one excluded Covid-related deaths, fully 49% of officers died from suicide. In 2017, 140 officers committed suicide, as opposed to 129 other line of duty deaths. Stress strikes home, too: last month, Minot Master Police Officer Patrick Blanchard took his own life; several years ago, a deputy US marshal, who I knew quite well, also committed suicide.

In addition to being a clinical psychologist, I’ve also had the privilege of serving as a Minot Alderman for 15 of the past 25 years. This has given me a deep understanding of the importance of supporting our law enforcement officers and providing them the tools they need to stay safe and do their jobs effectively.

Thinking clearly, managing emotions (such as the “fight-or-flight response”), maintaining optimism, and nurturing strong relationships with others, are some basic resiliency skills. They can be successfully taught and research shows that they really make a difference.

All of my education, experience, and training tells me that enhancing resiliency – the ability to withstand or to recover quickly from difficulties – is probably the best way to help our first responders. By and

large, they are optimistic, tough, and hard-working to begin with, so helping them learn more effective coping skills just builds on their natural strengths and underlying personality characteristics.

Interestingly, helping build resiliency skills fits in very well with what both psychologists and law enforcement professionals currently identify as “best practices”. For example, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) and the US Justice Department have developed a formal Law Enforcement Resilience Training Program, in conjunction with the University of Pennsylvania, which offers a variety of training resources, particularly a three-day long on site program to increase resilience. Based on strong scientific evidence, the skills that officers learn can prevent and decrease anxiety and depression, and increase optimism and well-being, improving their mental health and probably even their physical health.

The City of Minot is currently actively exploring a variety of steps to improve the mental health and functioning of our first responders, and could definitely use financial assistance in program development and implementation. I’m sure that other public safety agencies in the State could benefit from such support.

My only reservation about this Bill is that it authorizes funds to be granted “to a local children’s advocacy center” to implement a resiliency program. Since I was not involved in the efforts to create this legislation, I don’t know why this particular type of organization was chosen as the grant recipient. Please understand that I’m quite familiar with the work of children’s advocacy centers, hold them in high regard, and even served on the advisory board of our local facility. However, I don’t know that they have the expertise, or stated mission, to provide such services. To me, the Attorney General’s Office, the state Law Enforcement Training Academy, or even a college-based criminal justice training program (such as Minot State or Lake Region’s Peace Officer Training Program) would be a better match.

In conclusion, I would strongly encourage you to provide funding for a law enforcement resiliency grant program. We owe it to our peace officers to give them the best equipment and training to do their challenging jobs. To me, improving their resiliency skills is the best way to go.

SP/d