

March 7th, 2023

SB 2003

North Dakota House Appropriations Committee

Testimony from Sgt. Mike Bolme, Investigator, Bismarck Police Department

Chairman and Members of the Committee,

My name is Sgt. Mike Bolme and I am a supervisor in the Investigations Section for the Bismarck Police Department. I submit this testimony today in favor of SB 2003, with a particular focus on Section 9. Law Enforcement Resiliency Grant Program.

I am part of a team of professionals who travel around the state teaching burnout, empathic strain, and secondary trauma. Our team was trained by the TEND Academy which offers education and resources for helping professionals. That training not only focused on the effects of trauma on working professionals in caring professions, it also addressed how to build resiliency and deal with the aftereffects of that trauma. My intention for attending the training was to help my fellow law enforcement officers deal with the trauma we experience. Since receiving our certificates, our team has travelled throughout North Dakota educating not only law enforcement, but a multitude of other caring professions as well. I have personally presented to teachers, school administrators, peer support and addiction specialists, court personnel, and suicide hotline personnel (FirstLink).

I mention those other professions because they also experience the effects of primary and secondary trauma. But I have noticed differences in how those other professions talk about and deal with their trauma which sets them apart from law enforcement. We, as law enforcement, have a terrible culture as far as dealing with the repercussions and cumulative effects of the trauma we experience. That culture has a pervasive narrative of "suck it up" and not actually dealing with the emotional toll of our job experiences. I can demonstrate the difference in law enforcement culture based on the participation of our audience members relative to the other different professions. Simply put, we don't get the active feedback during our presentations from law enforcement as compared to other professions. The other professionals are far more apt to talk about their own personal experiences in an open setting. It can be difficult to get law enforcement participants to do the same. That is a part of our culture that is unhealthy and sometimes it makes me question why I'm doing the heavy lifting in addressing those issues. But I can show that what we are doing is making a difference.

Part of our presentation includes an online survey in which participants are asked to give feedback on the training. The response from those same law enforcement participants who have trouble sharing in a classroom setting has been overwhelmingly positive. I can cite multiple quotes like "We need this" and "I wish I had this when I first started". I can also cite examples of the harm our culture has done to those in our profession. I had to personally intervene with the person who wrote this comment:

"This training was presented well and the information was good. The presentation is not applicable to my place of employment. The supportive, we care, etc, in my experience is not accurate. The words used and the actions taken do not match one another. I would not recommend many of the steps discussed to a coworker who approached me as I would be concerned the person who came to me would be further

injured bringing this to management. Contrary to what is promoted by management some actions show the stigma and repercussions of mental health are true and current. EAP is good, but when there are conflicts with utilizing EAP other options would be beneficial. Some could argue that the outward trauma is minimal compared to the mental trauma that occurs within the building. Time should be added focusing on the dangers coming from behind you from within the organization in addition to outside trauma."

That quote was from a professional law enforcement officer who had also been traumatized by the stigma of asking for help from leadership. In the past, law enforcement leadership would react in unhealthy ways when an employee came forward with signs of post-traumatic stress. Those unhealthy ways could lead to ostracizing the employee from his co-workers, and worst-case scenario, loss of a career due to mental health issues. Officers are quietly hurting and it's going to take a cultural shift to correct that. Past practice has put the blame on the individual officer and to find fault in that officer for not taking care of themselves. To be clear, it is not the fault of the individual officer for suffering from the effects of post-traumatic stress. Traditionally our profession has pushed "self-care" and "work/life balance" but that has not been shown to be most effective. Organizational changes have been shown to be the most effective in dealing with these issues.

Simply put, we have a long way to go in overcoming our unhealthy work culture in dealing with post-traumatic stress and burnout. By supporting SB 2003, you can help ensure that we continue to address the effects of trauma and burnout as well as built resiliency in our law enforcement officers throughout the state.

Sgt. Mike Bolme
Investigator
Bismarck Police Department