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March 6, 2023

Office of the Sheriff

Jesse Jahner, Sheriff

To House Appropriations- Education and Environment Division:

My name is Deputy Ashley Bates and I am the head of the Peer Support team at the Cass County Sheriff's Office (CCSO). I have been with the Sheriff's Office since 2015. In my time with the CCSO, I have worked as a correctional officer, was provided field training for patrol, and currently help with running the Community Supervision Program out of the jail. Today, I want you hear my testimony in support of this specialized officer wellness program, as someone who has utilized services that have helped me and others I have worked with.

I want to share with you some experiences in my years of working in corrections to shed a light on the work environment and need for this programming. Over the years I have personally dealt with several incidents that were traumatic; in one week, I had an inmate cut both ankles in which I had to make tourniquets to stop the bleeding as the cell was covered in blood, an inmate medical emergency, an inmate overdose, and a co-worker experience a mental break down.

The co-worker's breakdown resulted in that co-worker locking me in a pod with an inmate and telling me I was going to die that day. There is no training for the day that your co-worker, who is supposed to have your back, ends up having their own crisis and could put your life at risk. This situation may have been avoided by them having access to specialized resources and support to get the help they needed.

In recent years, the negative perception of law enforcement by the public and media has been something that officers have to deal with every day along with the daily stressors of their job. There has been an increase within our jail of assaults on staff, assaults between inmates, suicidal inmates and mental health issues with inmates that result in them throwing bodily fluid and feces at corrections officers.

The daily twelve-hour long shifts of officers assigned to work with forty or more inmates in their pod make stressful situations on the job all the more difficult. CCSO patrol deputies go to domestic violence, suicide, child maltreatment, and death calls that all take a toll on our deputies. Experiencing all of that at work, along with the stress of life at home and finding that work/home balance can be difficult if we don't have the resources to help.

The Cass County Sheriff's Office has been committed to officer wellness support and has provided leadership in North Dakota to initiate work with a statewide law enforcement core team. In working collaboratively with this law enforcement core team to address issues of secondary trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder,

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compassion fatigue, and similar issues, I have been able to assist peers in helping them with traumatic events and then referred them to the specialized program for law enforcement officers and corrections staff. Over the last year I personally called law enforcement agencies throughout North Dakota to see if they had peer support teams, or some form of assistance for those in need of help during difficult times. Overwhelmingly, agencies reported that they had no resources but were eager to learn more and offer these resources in their own agencies.

Traditional Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) offered to law enforcement through their agencies don't work well for first responders. EAPs may be effective for those that are not in high-risk environments or who witness and live with trauma as a part of their regular job duties but have not been effective for me or other law enforcement I've spoken with. I personally tried accessing a traditional EAP and found that the counselor I saw lacked experience for the type of help I needed; they were young and recently graduated, were more interested in what I did in my daily job because they thought it was interesting more than being able to provide me with the services I needed. Additionally, there was a long wait to be scheduled and seen that did not meet needs for someone that is in high-risk need for help.

In comparison, I used a specialized therapy service called Resiliency.Support.Therapy (RST), that the law enforcement core team has been partnering and within five days I was scheduled and speaking with someone that I felt was capable of listening and helping me. As the Peer Support team leader, and an advocate for RST, it has been my passion to make sure that all law enforcement officers, and corrections staff have the resources within their departments to ensure traumatic incidents can be addressed quickly and by professionals who uniquely understand our needs. It is my hope that by supporting this bill you will ensure that we don't lose any more law enforcement to mental breakdowns and suicide.

Thank you,

Ashley Bates, Deputy
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