

Bradley Reed

President - Professional Fire Fighters of Vermont

Testimony in support of H.197

My name is Bradley Reed, I am the President of the Professional Fire Fighters of Vermont, and a captain with the St. Johnsbury Fire Department. The Professional Fire Fighters of Vermont (PFFV) has 250 union firefighters, EMT's and paramedics who serve Vermonters. I appreciate the opportunity to offer testimony in support of H197. This bill is essential to the health and well-being of our members who respond to emergencies every day, and with it, Vermont's first responders will have access to the treatment they need and deserve when they suffer a mental injury as a result of their occupation.

In the fire service culture, we have long been expected to portray a tough guy image. This has created expectations among our peers that we must be mentally unbreakable, and show no weakness even after witnessing some of the most horrifying incidents that can be imagined. For too long, our traditions have suppressed the fact that this work can have a significant emotional toll. The nightmares, PTSD, and depression. Today, our fire and EMS services are moving past that deeply rooted culture and breaking the stigma so that we can take care of our members, and ensure that they live healthy lives and continue to provide the essential services that our citizens need.

Recent research has shown that repeated prolonged exposure to traumatic events triggers PTSD at rates similar to those experienced by the military returning from combat. According to the Journal of Occupational Health, approximately twenty percent of firefighters and paramedics have PTSD. A 2015 Florida State University study found that nearly one half of the firefighters studied thought about suicide, 19.2% had plans for suicide, and 15.5% attempted suicide. The study suggests that those who suffer from PTSD are six times more likely to commit suicide compared to those who do not suffer from PTSD. Our union, the International Association of Firefighters (IAFF) recognizes this behavioral health crisis that is affecting our members across the country, and they have committed time and resources to research the PTSD and suicide crisis within the fire service. In response to this need the IAFF has developed a treatment process specifically for our firefighters. I am happy to say that on March 5th of this year, the IAFF opened the IAFF Center of Excellence for Behavioral Health Treatment and Recovery in Maryland, a program that they hope to expand nationwide, offering specialized treatment for IAFF members struggling with mental injuries. The Professional Firefighters of

Vermont have also taken steps to begin addressing PTSD in our membership. At our Convention last year, our members approved the formation of a standing health and wellness committee that will focus heavily on behavioral health. We are going to educate our members and give them access to IAFF resources to raise awareness about PTSD and help them recognize the signs and symptoms, and we are planning for a meeting with the Boston Fire Department health and wellness division to look at developing a peer support network. Our goal is to prevent PTSD to the greatest extent possible through early intervention, and to support our members who suffer PTSD and other mental injuries.

I suspect that some opponents may suggest a presumption for PTSD would place an undue financial burden on the workers compensation system. These concerns must also be balanced against the hidden expenses already incurred due to untreated mental injuries. When a mental injury keeps a firefighter out of work, the fire department must cover their shift with other off-duty firefighters at an overtime rate. In cases where PTSD forces first responders to leave the job they love, municipalities are forced to fill the vacancy with further overtime until they can recruit new firefighters and paramedics, and properly outfit them with the personal protective equipment and training they will need to safely fulfill the requirements of their organization. The human cost must also be a consideration. Our fire fighters and paramedics are doing a job that exposes them to extreme stress on a regular basis and throughout a twenty five to thirty year career. The presumption in H197 will provide much needed protection to Vermont's first responders by shifting the burden from the employee to the employer to prove cause of the injury for a population of workers who are exposed to extreme stress as a result of their occupation, at rates greater than that of other occupations.

H.197 is an important bill that will allow our members to receive the care they need and deserve in order to recover from a mental injury sustained in the performance of their sworn duty. It is important to note that the presumption would not eliminate the need for a job related mental injury, the first responder would only be able to make a claim when a work related injury was suffered. The intention of this legislation is to ensure that our members can seek treatment under the workers compensation system that was created to provide medical treatment and wage protections for workers who suffer job related injuries or illnesses. Our hopes are that swift treatment and early intervention will prevent PTSD from occurring so that we can prevent serious chronic conditions that destroy careers and rip families apart. In the event that PTSD does occur, our members who are already suffering will know that they can receive the treatment they need.

Some of you may remember, or may have been involved in passing workers compensation presumptions for firefighters suffering from work related cancer, heart disease, lung and infectious diseases. At that time there was an argument similar to that being made today claiming the cost would be prohibitive, and substantial. In reality, firefighters are receiving the treatment that they need for work related injuries and illnesses, and the workers compensation system has not collapsed.

Today we are asking for your support of H197 to provide protections to our first responders who are exposed to extreme stress on a day to day basis. We are asking for workers compensation benefits that allow our members access to the treatment that they need and deserve without placing an undue burden at their darkest time. We feel the cost of not taking action is more prohibitive than the cost of providing these protections. Our firefighters and paramedics report to work every day to take care of those who call for help, today we are asking you to take care of our members who are calling out for help. I urge your support for H.197 and hope that together we can take care of our first responders.