

Testimony of Bradley Reed, re H.197, Feb. 22, 2017

My name is Bradley Reed, I am the President of the Professional Fire Fighters of Vermont, and I am a Captain with the St. Johnsbury Fire Department. The Professional Fire Fighters of Vermont 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.

I believe it is important to share some historical context about the culture of the fire service. We have always held strongly onto the idea that we should portray a tough guy image. This has created expectations among our peers that we must be mentally tough 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. The PTSD. 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.

Our union, the International Association of Firefighters (IAFF) has made it a priority to address PTSD in our ranks. They took action in the recent past when they reached out to our 300,000 members to shed light on those suffering from PTSD and other debilitating mental injuries. They were overwhelmed by the number of members looking for help who called expressing relief that their union understood their struggles. Since then the IAFF has committed time and resources to research the PTSD and suicide crisis within the fire service and plan for a treatment process specifically for IAFF firefighters. I am happy to be able to say that this March, the IAFF will open 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 so that we can build resiliency to prevent PTSD to the greatest extent possible, and intervene earlier, and support our members who suffer PTSD and other mental injuries.

Vermont's firefighters and paramedics respond to incidents on a regular basis that expose them to potential mental injury. Without access to treatment, our firefighters and paramedics are left with few options. Some may self-medicate with alcohol, others will simply avoid dealing with their issues leading to poor work performance and a slow erosion of their ability to handle additional stress. 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.

I suspect that some opponents may suggest that this bill would place an undue financial burden on the workers compensation system. The same suggestions were made on previous presumptive bills when the reality is there was a reduction in premiums for consecutive years after the passage of the presumptive legislation for cancer and heart disease. These concerns must also be balanced against the hidden expenses already incurred due to untreated mental injuries: overtime to fill in for members whose mental injuries keep them out of work, and the cost to recruit and train new firefighters and paramedics when PTSD forces first responders to leave the job they love. H.197 is the important conduit 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 imperative that treatment be delivered swiftly and early, to prevent a disabling or life-threatening disorder from developing. The intention of this legislation is to ensure that our first responders can remain healthy and continue to work, and to prevent serious chronic conditions that destroy careers and rip families apart. 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.