

Testimony on S.243 Bradley Reed President, Professional Fire Fighters of Vermont

Good afternoon, my name is Bradley Reed, I am the President of the Professional Fire Fighters of Vermont. We represent 250 paid professional union firefighters, EMT's and paramedics. Our members provide highly skilled professional fire and emergency medical services to the cities of Burlington, South Burlington, Williston, Montpelier, Barre Town, St. Johnsbury, Rutland, Hartford, Springfield, and Brattleboro. As you are all aware, our members are exposed to traumatic stress over a twenty five to thirty year career and suffer PTSD and other service connected behavioral health injuries. We were proud to work closely with the Vermont legislature in 2017 and grateful for passage of a first in the nation presumption for PTSD and legislation that would allow our members to seek workers' compensation coverage for service connected mental injuries. This has proven to be a big step forward in breaking down the stigma, and providing an opportunity for our members to seek help when they need it most.

Statistics show that first responders are experiencing traumatic stress injuries at rates similar to that of our armed military services. The striking rate of suicidal ideation and attempted suicides by first responders is a sobering reminder that the stressors we endure day in and day out have a real emotional impact. Vermont set the example for the rest of the country in terms of providing real avenues for recognizing this crisis, treatment of occupational injuries, and breaking the stigma associated with behavioral health injuries, however we are still in the beginning phase of truly eradicating it's devastating impacts. S. 243 is a bill that would establish a committee of first responders who would be given certain authority to recommend policy and best practices to our legislators. We are committed to supporting this effort as it is important to the wellness of our first responders who will continue to be exposed to some of the most horrific events that occur in our communities.

While we stand in support of this committee, we also believe it is important that it be constructed exclusively of first responders and the clinicians who understand our occupation, and who our members trust. Firefighters, emergency medical technicians, and law enforcement officers truly share a bond with their brothers and sisters with whom they serve alongside. This special bond creates a level of trust and respect only understood by those who have had the privilege to serve in one of these capacities, and only by those who have shared

the horrific experiences that many of us have witnessed. As a consequence, our members to a very large degree only feel comfortable speaking with their fellow peers when they reveal that there is a need for help. This is how we are wired, and this is why we feel that this commission should be composed exclusively of first responders and their clinicians.

The one area we feel needs consideration is in the composition of the commission. We do not feel it is appropriate to include the Vermont League of Cities and Towns (VLCT) on this committee as they are not first responders. While VLCT represents many of our communities, they also provide workers' compensation insurance to a great number of first responders in Vermont. We simply believe that having a group who is our insurance company influencing our thoughts will be counter productive if the goal is to truly hear what is on the minds of Vermont's first responders. So while we personally respect the representatives of VLCT, we would respectfully ask the committee to consider amending this bill to exclusively include first responders and clinicians who have specific experience with the first responder community.

In closing, I would again like to say thank you from the Professional Fire Fighters of Vermont for your continued interest in the wellness of our members who are truly Vermont's Bravest. And thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on S.243. I would be happy to answer any questions if there are any