

Good morning,

My name is Joe Corrow. I serve as President of the Vermont Fraternal Order of Police State Lodge, representing 322 law enforcement officers across the State of Vermont. I have been a police officer with the Burlington Police Department for nearly twelve years. I spent my first nine years assigned to patrol, where I served as a Field Training Officer and continue to instruct patrol procedures with an emphasis on officer safety tactics. I am currently assigned to the Detective Services Bureau and serve as a team leader on our Emergency Response Unit. I am also the immediate past president of the Burlington Police Officers Association, FOP Lodge 21.

For the majority of my patrol career, I worked the evening shift, from 4:45 p.m. to 2:45 a.m. Most shifts concluded with bar closing details, where we managed large crowds and frequent fights from Thursday through Saturday nights. I spent many nights breaking up altercations and making arrests in our downtown district. When the Burlington Police Department was staffed at approximately 95 officers, these incidents were generally well managed. Officers not actively engaged in an arrest created space between the arrest team and bystanders who attempted to interfere or escalate the situation.

Over the past five years, with a substantially reduced police force, I have witnessed and personally been involved in far more chaotic scenes. Officers are often required to restrain an arrestee while simultaneously trying to control a crowd that is encroaching, yelling, filming at close range, or physically interfering. This dynamic increases tension, increases the likelihood that force will be used, and creates significant risk for both the public and officers.

Vermont already has a statute addressing impeding public officers under 13 V.S.A. § 3001. That statute criminalizes hindering an officer acting under authority and includes serious conduct such as removing or depriving an officer of a weapon. It carries a potential penalty of up to three years imprisonment. However, in practice, § 3001 is often applied to more direct or clearly obstructive conduct and typically after interference has crossed a substantial threshold. It does not always provide a clear, narrowly tailored mechanism to address crowd based interference before it escalates into physical confrontation or an attempt to disarm an officer.

H.697 fills that gap. By establishing defined boundaries around interference with first responders in active scenes and classifying violations as a misdemeanor, it creates a proportional and enforceable deterrent. It gives officers and prosecutors an additional practical tool to intervene earlier, before a volatile situation turns into an assault, a weapon grab, or a deadly force encounter. This is not about expanding authority without limits. It is about providing clarity and a measured response option in circumstances that are increasingly common.

As this bill applies to first responders more broadly, the same challenges arise for firefighters and paramedics. In Burlington, we routinely see emergency medical personnel attempting to render care while bystanders crowd in, interfere, or refuse to give space. Clear statutory authority supports their safety as well.

Last year, two officers attempted to detain an individual in the alleyway between Church Street and City Hall Park. During the incident, a large crowd formed and began trying to pull officers away from the suspect. The officers were actively preventing that individual from retrieving a firearm from his person. That situation nearly resulted in tragedy.

These types of incidents are not unique to Burlington. Law enforcement agencies across Vermont routinely face dynamic, rapidly evolving scenes where officers are attempting to take individuals into custody while others interfere, obstruct, or escalate the situation.

H.697 represents a measured and practical addition to existing law. It reinforces clear boundaries at active emergency scenes, supports accountability through proportionate consequences, and helps reduce the likelihood that routine enforcement actions escalate into serious or deadly outcomes.