

Representative Black,

I am writing to you as a member of the Vermont Police Association, a representative on the Vermont Emergency Responder Wellness Commission and as a first responder in Vermont. My name is Emily Leinoff. I am a Dispatcher in Newport, and have been a Dispatcher for 18 years. I am writing to show my support of bill H.270. The importance of having confidentiality for peer support members is crucial to the wellbeing of first responders. These folks work tirelessly, around the clock, and even a lot of times as volunteers to keep our state and community members safe. The tolls that these professions have on us is not something that's easy to explain. I have dedicated my entire adult life to public safety and have experienced the traumas and the effect those traumas have on me like so many others. After handling multiple critical incidents in a short amount of time, I found myself suffering from post traumatic stress and unsure if I would be able to return to the career I love, or even continue functioning. I was not eating, I couldn't sleep, and my health was declining rapidly because of the traumas I experienced. In the moment I knew I needed help so badly, but confidentiality played a big role in who I was able to talk to because of the nature of work. Like my colleagues, there are a lot of incidents that we are bound by confidentiality and are not able to speak to people freely about, which then leaves us only the option of speaking with a licensed mental health professional. This is not a feasible means of support for our first responders, who again, work around the clock. There are very few clinicians in Vermont that are even properly equipped with treating first responders because what we deal with is so out of the ordinary for the general population. It takes a specialized clinician to support first responders and they have to have the cultural competency to understand what we are handling. Because of this confidentiality issue, I was not able to speak with peer support and instead had to suffer for weeks before I could even have the opportunity to speak with a clinician and start treatment. The effects of having to keep this trauma inside of me lasted for months. In addition to this wait, I also had to worry about the cost of treatment and whether insurance or workers compensation would cover it. Financial stress on top of critical incident stress is the last thing first responders need. As I mentioned, many of our communities are protected by individuals who volunteer their efforts and do not always have insurance plans to cover the cost of these treatments. As a peer support member, I understand the training and experience it takes to fill that roll, and how crucial it is to our first responders to have us as a resource, and as a resource that is free of charge. This bill ensures that other first responders are able to seek help as soon as the effects start so that they don't have to suffer like I did. I urge you to continue supporting this bill so that our state can help our first responders with the aftermath of them protecting us.

Thank you for your time and consideration

Emily Leinoff