

Respected members of the House Finance Committee,

My name is Wilson Luther. I am a military veteran with 9 years of service in the Regular Army as a Black Hawk Crew chief, and 9 years of service as a fire fighter on the Bristol Volunteer department. I come from a long line of service embers in these fields, with men like my father serving as a Drill Sergeant for the Army and retired as the Asst. Chief of the Newport Naval Fire Dept, like my grandfather who served as a fire fighter and Fire Chief of Bristol for decades, and my uncles who served on Bristol PD and other departments. I mention this because I grew up around those professions and fully understand what they entail, the sacrifice asked of those that serve to care for their communities, and of the promise made to them by those communities they serve to be cared for when they no longer can. It is from this place of understanding that I am reaching out to you to express my support in favor of HB 5765, and to ask you to lend your support to this bill as well. HB 5765 would add Probation and Parole Officers (PPO's) to the list of law enforcement professionals eligible for a faster rate of pension accrual, and a younger age in which they could retire from service. It would extend the promise to those not yet as well recognized as the Fire or Police departments, but provide no less an essential service, at similar risk to themselves, for the safety of the public.

I understand this may not be a small ask. In a year marked by fiscal challenges, this ask could be wrongly viewed as just a grab for more money by state employees. But we must not view this as such, but rather through a lens that reflects the totality of the circumstances, and the reality of this profession, indeed all professions involved in public safety in some way or another, and the expectations put upon those men and women who have stepped up to serve in an increasingly thankless, but needed, profession.

When you consider the professions already included in the retirement option this bill would add PPO's to, there is a sense of justification to providing them with a faster rate of accrual towards their pension and a younger age at which they can retire from service, brought about by a near universal understanding of what their jobs entail. If I were to ask you about the physical demands or the risks associated with being a corrections officer, a police officer or a fire fighter, you would have a general idea of their work environment, and why you don't want those men and women to be forced to continue to work in that environment at an advanced age. What many do not realize, is that probation and parole officers work with the same population of individuals as these current members of public safety, and we regularly do it in as, if not more, dangerous situations overall.

For example, according to the federal crime data base, the most common interaction between the police and a civilian is a compliant traffic ticket. But, according to a Federal review

of Probation and Parole conducted in 2013, for PPO's it is a home visit to the residence of a non-compliant convicted offender. As part of our duties, PPO's conduct visits to the residences of convicted offenders. Primarily, a home visit is being conducted for one of 2 reasons; the first is the offender is a higher risk to the public safety and has been placed on a more intensive caseload, and the second is that the offender has become non-compliant. In regard to the former, our intensive caseloads are comprised of individuals that have committed sex or domestic offenses often of a violent nature. Please take a moment to understand exactly what that means... PPOs are conducting these visits to individuals that have demonstrated a propensity for violence, and are doing so on their turf... in homes where they could have hidden weapons, other people with hostile intent, where they know the layout and exits, etc. Additionally, we are often visiting the homes of these individuals *after* they have already willfully refused to comply with the conditions a court of law placed upon them after finding them guilty, where the offender knows that we are there to violate them, to bring them back before a judge, and ultimately, potentially, have their freedom stripped.

When PPOs interact with these likely violent, high-risk offenders, they are doing so without the same equipment other law enforcement officers have at their disposal. We are limited to a soft vest that is, at best, resistant to the most common forms of readily available weaponized assault (knives and small arms fire) and a small canister of gel-based OC. No radios to call for back up. No firearms should the worst-case scenario become a reality. No handcuffs to even restrain offenders with violent histories. Instead, we conduct these visits with only a single partner at best, and oftentimes find ourselves alone. These are not conditions you want a 55+ year old to respond to, unless you wish to invite the opportunity for a catastrophe that even the federal government recognizes should not be entertained.

To turn from what currently is and look forward to the future for a moment, these duties and the circumstances in which PPOs perform them are recognized as higher risk by the director of the Department of Corrections, and it is my understanding that he is making movement towards developing a PPO academy, with the intent to better train and prepare his officers for the duties expected of them now, and in the future. A course of action that could lay the foundation for a Rhode Island Probation and Parole unit that would be used to set the standard for training, knowledge and professionalism nationwide. An endeavor I believe is warranted and stand behind.

It is my strongly held belief that we cannot allow ourselves to fail to recognize the high risk, public safety based duties the Probation and Parole Officers of this great State of Rhode Island regularly perform, but rather show them they are not forgotten by a community that might not have understood all they do to keep them safe, and to let those officers know without a doubt that their contributions and sacrifices are appreciated. I for one, can think of no better

way for a community to show its appreciation than to extend the same promise granted to other officers of law and safety to the professional, dedicated men and women of Probation and Parole.

Thank you,

Wilson R. Luther III

President

Rhode Island Probation and Parole Association