

TOWN OF BURRILLVILLE

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April 2, 2024

The Honorable Stephen M. Casey
House Municipal Government and Housing Committee
Rhode Island State House
82 Smith St.
Providence RI, 02903

RE: HOUSE BILL 2024 - H 7464 AN ACT RELATING TO TOWNS AND CITIES -- RELIEF OF INJURED AND DECEASED FIRE FIGHTERS AND POLICE OFFICERS

Dear Chairman Casey and Honorable Members of the House Municipal Government and Housing Committee:

I am writing on behalf of the Town of Burrillville to express our strong opposition to House Bill 7464, which proposes to extend injured-on-duty (IOD) benefits to police officers and firefighters suffering from diagnosed post-traumatic stress injury (PTSI) under certain conditions. While we appreciate the intention to support public safety personnel, we have serious concerns about creating a new presumption for PTSI within the IOD system without comprehensive reform.

As previously testified, the current IOD system requires significant reform before introducing new benefits. While we acknowledge the rising prevalence of PTSI among police officers and firefighters nationwide, we urge the General Assembly to approach this issue with careful consideration and thoroughness to avoid unintended consequences.

We commend the sponsor for engaging in this critical conversation and recognize the importance of supporting affected individuals. However, we believe that any legislative action must prioritize treatment and services over cash payments, following the successful models observed in other states. For instance, Connecticut's PTSI bill, passed in 2019, focuses on treatment and includes stringent criteria for PTSI diagnosis, ensuring that those most in need receive appropriate support.

Our primary concern with House Bill 7464 is the potential increase in spending on IOD benefits, which poses administrative and fiscal challenges for cities and towns. The current IOD system, particularly for municipal employees, can allow individuals to remain out of work indefinitely, as exemplified by cases like the police detective in Warren who retired after 22 years on IOD status. This highlights weaknesses in the current system that need urgent attention.

Moreover, the rising number of PTSI claims by employees underscores the importance of thorough evaluation and safeguards. While we appreciate the exclusion of work performance issues as a justification for PTSI claims in the sponsor's bill, we urge the General Assembly to review best

practices from other states, such as setting higher thresholds for PTSI diagnosis to prevent abuse of the system.

The experience of other communities, such as, The League of Minnesota Cities Insurance Trust (LMCIT), which insures all cities in the state except for Minneapolis and eight other self-insured cities, has seen 386 PTSD claims since 2013 — 286 of them since 2019 — resulting in workers' compensation payouts of \$26.1 million not including another \$18 million that has been set aside for future payouts on similar claims, underscores the importance of adequate funding mechanisms to address presumption-related claims and any potential impact on Rhode Island's 39 cities and towns.

In conclusion, while we recognize the challenges faced by public safety officials and support efforts to provide essential treatment and services, we urge the General Assembly to:

- Prioritize reforms to the underlying IOD system for municipal public safety.
- We respectfully suggest amendments to the bill as currently written regarding what constitutes a "qualifying event"
- Tightening the language in section (f) "as defined in §§ 45-19-1(b) and (c) who is unable to perform his or her duties by reason of post-traumatic stress injury"

We stand ready to collaborate with the sponsor to achieve these important objectives while ensuring responsible and effective support for our police officers and firefighters.

On behalf of the Town of Burrillville, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to express our views and we look forward to continued collaboration on this critical issue.

Regards,



Donald A. Fox, President
Burrillville Town Council