



NATIONAL FRATERNAL ORDER OF POLICE

PATRICK YOES NATIONAL PRESIDENT

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11 February 2022

The Honorable L. Tammy Duckworth
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable John Cornyn III
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Richard J. Durbin
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Thomas R. Tillis
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Timothy M. Kaine
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Susan M. Collins
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Cory A. Booker
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable James M. Inhofe
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senators Duckworth, Cornyn, Durbin, Tillis, Kaine, Collins, Booker, and Inhofe,

I am writing on behalf of the members of the Fraternal Order of Police to thank you for introducing S. 3635, the "Public Safety Officer Support Act," and to advise you of our strong support for this legislation, which would expand the eligibility of certain officers or their surviving family for death and disability benefits as provided for by the Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB) program.

As a profession, we do a very good job at protecting our officers' physical safety by providing them with tools like anti-ballistic body armor. Until recently, however, we have done a very poor job recognizing or addressing the tremendous mental stress our officers endure as a consequence of their service and the negative impact the job has on their physical, emotional, and mental health. Law enforcement and other public safety officers face a 25.6 times higher risk of developing acute stress disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other mental health conditions than those in other professions, and some statistics suggest that a law enforcement officer will experience more traumatic events in six months than the average person will experience in a lifetime.

In recent years, our profession has improved by expanding the kinds of services and support available to officers who are struggling with mental wellness and, perhaps more importantly, we have begun to erase the stigma associated with those who do seek or receive help with their mental health. Even with this progress, we estimate that 147 officers still took their own lives in 2021.

Recently, Congress has also been supportive in assisting law enforcement in designing and funding peer support counseling at the Federal level as well as resources for local and State agencies to develop mental health and wellness services and to establish programs to track and prevent suicides. In just the last four years, Congress passed the Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act in 2018, the Supporting and Treating Officers in Crisis (STOIC) Act in 2019, the Law Enforcement Suicide Data Collection Act in 2020, and the Confidentiality Opportunities for Peer Support (COPS) Counseling Act just this past November. These laws recognize that the men and women who serve in law enforcement are subjected to incredible stresses which can lead to acute stress disorder, PTSD, and suicide. These mental health issues are, in virtually every case, connected to their service as law enforcement officers. The U.S. Armed Forces recognize the vast majority of suicides as line-of-duty deaths because they understand the “invisible injuries” to the mind and spirit that are inflicted as a result of their service. It is time that the Public Safety Officers’ Benefits (PSOB) program extends similar recognition to law enforcement and other public safety officers.

The legislation you have introduced acknowledges the connection between suicide and service-connected mental health issues and amends the PSOB program by providing death and disability benefits to officers who attempt to take or do take their own life.

The bill provides that an officer who is diagnosed with acute stress disorder, PTSD, or another similar mental health condition who commits or attempts to commit suicide is presumed to “constitute personal injury” as defined in the PSOB statute. This would allow the officer, or his surviving family, to claim the death or disability benefit administered by the PSOB program.

It also establishes a similar presumption that any officer “who has contacted or attempted to contact the employee assistance program of the agency or entity that the officer serves, a licensed medical or mental health professional, suicide prevention services, or another mental health assistance service in order to receive help, treatment, or diagnosis” is also eligible to make a PSOB death or disability claim.

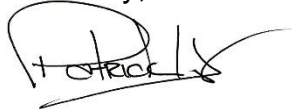
Finally, your legislation recognizes the cumulative and corrosive effects of the mental stress suffered by law enforcement and other public safety officers. Just as an officer who dies from a gunshot wound years after being shot, some officers reach a point where they are overcome and consider suicide. To address this, the bill creates the same presumption for any public safety officer who responds or responded to a mass casualty, mass death, or mass shooting event. Responses to an incident like Sandy Hook, the Pulse nightclub, or the Las Vegas shooting may not have an immediate impact on many officers whose training and mental resiliency allow them to respond to

the crisis and, in many cases, cope with their trauma and continue to serve. But some officers—too many—are unable to cope. They may struggle in silence and not seek the help they need or develop unhealthy coping mechanisms like substance abuse which accelerate their downward emotional spiral until they reach that dark place and see suicide as a solution to their pain. We need to do everything we can to help these officers—indeed, we have a responsibility to do so. However, on those occasions in which we fail them, we absolutely cannot fail the families they leave behind or fail to help the officer who survives the attempt. They should be eligible to file a claim with the PSOB program, and your bill would do this.

At long last, we have reached a point in grappling with police suicides, as well as those in other public safety professions, to address what we have known for many years—that long-term exposure to mental stress and traumatic events over the course of service can inflict “invisible injuries” on the men and women in law enforcement, injuries that may be left untreated and have a fatal outcome. The fact is that acute stress disorder or PTSD is just as disabling as a physical injury and an officer who suffers from this or a similar disorder that may result in suicide is just as service-connected as any other line-of-duty death. We believe this legislation shows compassion and support for our officers and their families and that it provides another step towards building support for officers facing mental wellness crises.

On behalf of the more than 364,000 members of the Fraternal Order of Police, we thank you all for your leadership on this critically important issue. If I can be of any additional assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me or Executive Director Jim Pasco in our Washington, D.C. office.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Patrick Yoes", with a stylized flourish extending to the right.

Patrick Yoes
National President