



Kansas Bureau of Investigation

Tony Mattivi
Director

Kris W. Kobach
Attorney General

Before the Senate Committee on Judiciary
HB 2557 (Proponent)
ASAC Karen Blanton, Wellness Coordinator, KBI
March 7, 2024

Chairwoman Warren and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to present proponent testimony regarding your consideration of HB 2557.

The Kansas Bureau of Investigation (KBI) supports the passage of House Bill 2557, which expands the definition of a peer support counseling session. The KBI believes this bill is crucial for the continued success of the many peer support programs that serve our first responders throughout Kansas.

The KBI has provided peer support services to our Kansas law enforcement partners since 2007. Our peer support team frequently organizes and provides statewide responses to first responders in crisis. Oftentimes, this type of response is the result of a critical incident or traumatic event which has occurred. In this capacity, peer support counseling sessions are typically facilitated in a group setting, known as a Critical Incident Stress Debrief (CISD). These debriefs provide a confidential setting for individuals involved in the same unique event to successfully process what they have just experienced, with individuals who understand their profession, who they can freely and openly speak in front of, and who they trust. This empathetic environment often empowers more reluctant peers to speak, who otherwise would not participate by allowing them an opportunity to share their struggles and successfully process the traumatic event. Group debriefs play a crucial role in allowing first responders to move forward in a healthy manner, enabling them to remain employed as they continue to protect and serve the citizens of Kansas.

Frequently, the request for a peer support counseling session comes from an individual who is experiencing cumulative trauma brought on by a career full of unprocessed critical incidents and traumatic events. Trauma has accumulated for these individuals due to the negative stigma historically attached to first responders who seek mental health assistance in order to deal with the "normal" aspects of their profession. First responders are expected to be superhuman-like and unaffected by the many traumatic

events they encounter while working. Seeking help has traditionally been seen as a weakness and a reason to question an individual's suitability for the profession. The KBI has worked tirelessly to dispel this myth. Being able to support peers in their times of crises, through various modes of communication, while guaranteeing absolute confidentiality, has proven to be one of the most successful approaches for combating this erroneous belief.

First responders do not only seek peer support assistance for work-related challenges, they also, and probably more commonly, seek it for personal struggles they experience at home, or once experienced during their childhood. While these incidents seem unrelated to an individual's employment, repeated exposure to critical events on the job can cause these past, unresolved traumas to resurface. In addition, stressful work environments in general, often have traumatic effects on an individual's personal life and health. And finally, the "normal" stresses of life experienced by the population as a whole (e.g., divorce, serious illness, death of a loved one, etc.), are also experienced by the first responder community as well.

Being able to confidentially seek peer support services to navigate their personal challenges, while continuing to work in a high stress, high risk career, allows the first responder to have a more happy personal life. While this is the goal for a community of professionals who have a passion for helping others, the side effect of creating a happy personal life for employees, is creating a happier and more successful work life for them too. The net effect is fewer disruptions to their work and a higher retention rate of valued employees. For these individuals, the chosen method of communication for their peer support assistance is often something less stigmatizing and gentler feeling, such as a text message, an email or a phone call. Being allowed to keep an arm's length distance from the peer support team member until they have built trust and belief in the confidentiality of the interaction is of paramount importance. Once this trust is established, more conventional ways of communicating may occur and the individual can start processing the layers of cumulative trauma he/she has tried so hard to repress.

An investment in protected mental health services not only positively affects current employees, as described above, but it also affects new and future employees. The efforts of so many to reduce the stigma of first responders seeking mental health assistance is fortunately starting to be seen more and more during the hiring process. As we hire newer generations of workers, the expectation of good mental health care is a priority for them as part of the overall employment experience. In this way, offering protected mental health services is a recruitment incentive for employers. And once hired, the strong investment placed on the overall health and wellness of an employee increases the likelihood of a positive work-life balance, job satisfaction and career longevity. However, this can only be done if peer support counseling sessions are unequivocally held to be confidential, regardless of the communication method, or the setting in which they occur.

In summary, throughout the KBI's 17 years of experience with supporting first responders, we have developed trust amongst our peers and lessened the stigma for seeking mental health assistance. We have done so, by working hard to understand the

needs of first responders. In so doing, we have come to recognize the importance of all modes of communication in order to mitigate the associated adverse effects of the work first responders are required to engage in. Ensuring all of these methods of communication remain protected and confidential, whether they pertain to personal matters or professional matters, whether they are in-person or via electronic means and whether they occur in individual or group settings, is of utmost import and should be our priority. Therefore, the Kansas Bureau of Investigation respectfully requests the passage of House Bill 2557, to protect peer support counseling sessions in all forms. Our first responders need and deserve such protection.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this important bill.