

Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder, and other esteemed members of the committee,

It is with great respect and gratitude that I stand before you today. I recognize the immense responsibility and dedication each of you carries in representing the voices of the people, and I deeply appreciate this opportunity to address such a distinguished body. Today, I wish to speak on a matter of great importance—a rebuttable presumption that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) arises out of and in the course of a public safety servant's employment. This protection is not just a policy; it is a lifeline for those who dedicate their lives to protecting others.

My name is Lucas Brundage, I live in Sebago Maine, and I am a firefighter and paramedic with the Portland Fire Department. I have served as a first responder with honor since 2004, dedicating over 12 years to the city of Portland. My career has been one of commitment, sacrifice, and an unwavering desire to serve my community and I am here today to speak in support of LD82.

For much of my service, I have worked on a Medical Crisis Unit or a Portland ambulance, responding to emergencies that most people only witness on television. I have served as a tactical medic, standing alongside the Portland Police Department's Special Reaction Team, providing medical support in some of the most high-risk situations our city has faced. I have seen suffering, devastation, and loss—far more than any human should. I share this background not to highlight my own experience, but to underscore a reality that thousands of first responders live every day—a reality that too often takes a toll on our mental health.

Every day, first responders step into the unknown, walking into burning buildings, tending to horrific accident scenes, and confronting violence. We are trained to act swiftly and decisively, to remain composed in the face of chaos. But what people do not see—what is not talked about enough—is the weight that this profession places on our minds and our hearts. We are the ones who witness the final moments of a child's life. We are the ones who comfort families after delivering unbearable news. We are the ones who stand between life and death, carrying the burden of every loss, every tragedy, every moment that lingers long after the sirens fade.

Over time, the accumulation of trauma begins to wear us down. PTSD is not just a battlefield injury—it exists in our firehouses, in our police stations, in our dispatch centers, and in our ambulances. The damage is silent at first, creeping in through sleepless nights, anxiety, depression, and eventually, a breaking point. That breaking point came for me one year ago.

After years of service—years of helping people on their worst day—I found myself in need of help. I was diagnosed with PTSD, a condition that is all too common in our profession but far too often left untreated due to stigma, bureaucracy, or lack of support. While some resources were available, I quickly realized that there was a significant disconnect between my department and the help I needed. The response was slow, uncertain, and clouded by red tape. I was left feeling isolated, as if my struggles were mine to bear alone.

It was not until our union president intervened and invoked the legislature that protects first responders that things changed. Only then did the city and department align. Only then was I allowed the time to rest, recover, and heal. I cannot overstate how crucial these protections were to my recovery. Without them, I do not know how much longer the city and private agencies would have continued pointing fingers, delaying assistance, and leaving me to navigate my mental health crisis alone.

Because of these protections, I was able to heal. I was able to return to work—not just as the firefighter and paramedic I was before, but as someone with a deeper understanding of the challenges my fellow first responders face. I now use my experience to advocate for better mental health support and to ensure that no firefighter, no police officer, no dispatcher, or paramedic has to fight this battle alone.

I stand before you today because I know I am not alone in this struggle. I stand here for every first responder who has been diagnosed with PTSD. I stand here for those who are still suffering in silence, afraid to seek help for fear of stigma, reprisal, or bureaucratic inaction.

The numbers are staggering. Studies show that first responders are at a significantly higher risk of PTSD, depression, and suicide compared to the general population. Yet, despite this, too many are left without the protections they need to heal. Too many are forced to prove that their mental health injury is work-related, despite the overwhelming evidence that PTSD is an occupational hazard in public safety professions.

By maintaining and strengthening presumptive PTSD protections, we are not just acknowledging the reality of mental health in our profession—we are sending a message that first responders matter, that their well-being matters, and that their service will not come at the cost of their mental health. I urge you to maintain and uphold these critical protections. To stand in support of the officers, dispatchers, firefighters, and medical providers who put their lives on the line every day.

They provide an invisible layer of protection for all of us. It is time we offer them a layer of protection in return—a resource, a safety net, a light in the darkness when all hope seems lost. Let us ensure that no first responder has to fight for the care they deserve. Let us honor their service not just with words, but with action.

Thank you for your time, your consideration, and your commitment to those who serve.

*Lucas Brundage*