

Testimony of Anthony “Peter” Morrell on behalf of The Professional Firefighters of Maine

Before the Maine Legislative Labor Committee, Public Hearing: 11 February 2025

LD 82, “An Act to Amend the Workers Compensation Laws by Extending Indefinitely the Presumption Applying to Law Enforcement Officers, Corrections Officers, E-911 Dispatchers, Firefighters and Emergency Medical Services Persons Diagnosed with Post traumatic Stress Disorder”

Good Afternoon esteemed members of the Maine Legislative Labor Committee. My name is Anthony “Peter” Morrell. I am currently employed as a 24 year veteran of the Lewiston Fire Department, member of IAFF Local 785 Lewiston Firefighters Association, and member in good standing with the Professional Firefighters of Maine. I am providing testimony today supporting removal of the repeal/sunset of LD 82.

First responders are always at the forefront of each incident or disaster, and they ensure the safety and well-being of the population. They are, however, at great danger of being exposed to potentially traumatic situations that pose risk of harm to them or the people under their care. This constitutes a great risk for the behavioral health of first responders, putting them at further risk for stress, PTSD, depression, substance use, and suicide ideation or attempts. Recent studies show that suicide is rapidly approaching and soon may overtake cardiac arrest as the leading cause of firefighter fatalities. Both natural and technological disasters were found to be associated with increased risk of these conditions, as were factors such as resiliency, trust in self and team, duration on the disaster scene, individual coping style, and post-disaster mental health support. First responders carry the weight of their own safety and well-being as well as those they serve. Therefore behavioral health issues associated with PTSD are becoming more and more commonplace. Adding unnecessary layers of stress and uncertainty to first responders are the multitudes of roadblocks, entanglements, and cumbersome processes dealing with navigating the Maine Workers Compensation Laws. Without presumption of these behavioral health symptoms being directly related to PTSD it becomes nearly impossible to provide adequate proof to satisfy the workers compensation requirements needed to properly address treatment for these injuries.

Using my own experience as an example and case study, In January 2019 I was admitted and spent 60 days of treatment at the IAFF Center of Excellence in Maryland for PTSD treatment as a co-occurring disorder with alcoholism and drug addiction. During my treatment I learned that the PTSD I was suffering from was considered Complex PTSD. The symptoms I was experiencing were not only job related but happening as a result of a traumatic event that happened to me directly. My time there was life changing to say the least and has served to bring me where I am today, with you

and my peers, discussing these topics that I have actively sought to address. I formed relationships with a core group of individuals that remain a part of my life. One striking common theme that we have all experienced is the lack of qualified and accessible aftercare upon release from treatment. As an example, the therapist I was fortunate enough to be connected with was located in Kingston New Hampshire which equated to an overall three-hour commute twice a week for one-hour sessions for the first 16-18 months of my continuing aftercare. They unfortunately have also shared with me their stories of the nightmare that has been trying to receive Workers Compensation benefits associated with their injuries due to the extremely difficult nature of navigating the unwieldy requirements of the system. Again, another unnecessary layer of excessive stringency added to an already overwhelming diagnosis. Many have confided in me several times about how difficult this is. Not ideal for folks fresh out of inpatient treatment.

There have been at least four others that I became close with and were part of my trauma groups who took their own lives after returning home. To that end, it became my personal mission with the guidance and assistance of Amy Davenport-Daiken and The Professional Firefighters of Maine to find and create solutions for this problem. Our biggest challenges obviously are (A) lack of funding, (B) the need for legislation to create sustainable, accessible, and viable programs and (C) work done in overhauling the workers comp system and breaking down barriers in PTSD treatment. Now that workers comp has recognized PTSD as presumptive in our jobs, very steep barriers remain in realizing the full scope of what this presumptive clause really means. In other words, this clause only appears to be lip service and in actuality disregards the concept in practice. This has been done by putting up endless administrative and technical restrictions to implementing and recognizing this presumption as viable. To worsen matters further, municipalities apply additional layers of stress by creating contentious work environments, i.e. not bargaining in good faith, poor interpersonal relationships, and inconsistent or unreasonable disciplinary actions.

Obviously, none of the above stated conditions provide for healthy treatment or recovery for the people who find themselves potentially in harm's way everyday they are on duty protecting the public sector. Without viable and sustainable programs available to treat first responders we run the risk of losing dedicated and talented professionals to behavioral and mental health problems which not only impact the public, but the families and friends of our brothers and sisters. The time has come for action and we have the opportunity to make the needed changes to protect and help our coworkers and stop this troubling trend before it's too late. Thank you for your time and consideration.