

Local officer troubled by rise of suicide among first responders

by Payton Marshall

Monday, May 10th 2021







Sinclair College officer Tom McMurry. McMurry retired as officer after 15-years with Sinclair College. He received the Distinguished Action Award for his response during the mass shooting in the Oregon District. Since the global pandemic, McMurry has returned part-time to his position as a Sinclair College officer. (Dayton 24/7 Now photo)

DAYTON, Ohio (WKEF) -- Suicide among first responders has become a problem in Ohio. Sinclair College Officer Tom McMurry said, "More officers have taken their own lives, than have died at the hands of others. Our greatest enemy is ourselves." House Bill 308 is a solution to help struggling first responders, but the ten-year journey of the bill faces one final hurdle.

The bill went into effect on April 12, 2021. It established a fund to provide compensation and benefits for first responders with post-traumatic stress disorder. Once the bill receives funding from the general revenue fund, it will protect first responders who decide to seek treatment or receive a PTSD diagnosis.

"Although I believe that old stigmas about toughness and masculinity do exist, I think it is likely that more first responders are unaware of their own needs," said McMurry.

McMurtry received the Distinguished Action Award for his response during the 2019 Oregon District mass shooting and was awarded the Bronze Star Medal during his service in Iraq while part of the U.S. Army Special Forces (HALO, Jumpmaster).

“You show up, you do all that you can, you work as hard as you can — do every smart thing you can think of — realizing there are those that are beyond your help,” said McMurtry, as he reflected on the commotion on the Oregon District streets on August 4, 2019.



Dayton 24/7 Now photo: Sinclair College officer Tom McMurtry. McMurtry retired as officer after 15-years with Sinclair College.

He received the Distinguished Action Award for his response during the mass shooting in the Oregon District. Since the global pandemic, McMurtry has returned part-time to his position as a Sinclair College officer.

Nine people were killed on that Sunday morning. Although McMurtry was one of the first to respond, he said nothing could have prepared him for when he returned home.

“My wife finding the blood from the — you know from the mass shooting — on her kitchen floor, that was the thing that she found most upsetting because it couldn't have been more personal,” said McMurtry.



Dayton 24/7 Now photo: Sinclair College officer Tom McMurtry. McMurtry retired as officer after 15-years with Sinclair College. He received the Distinguished Action Award for his response during the mass shooting in the Oregon District. Since the global pandemic, McMurtry has returned part-time to his position as a Sinclair College officer.

After the Oregon District shooting, McMurtry was approached about seeing psychologist [Dr. Kathy Platoni](#).

“It turned out I needed to be there. I needed the visit but know it was not my idea. I did not raise my hand, but when it was offered — I was smart enough to accept it and to go,” said McMurtry.

He believes most first responders are unaware of their own suffering.



Dayton 24/7 Now photo: Sinclair College officer Tom McMurtry speaks with reporter Payton Marshall about the need to increase public awareness regarding the mental health crisis that exists within the first responder culture.

Suicide rates for first responders are skyrocketing at an alarming rate. [Blue H.E.L.P.](#) reports 238 officers died by suicide in 2019 compared to the [89 officers who died in the line of duty](#) that year.



Dayton 24/7 Now photo: Sinclair College officer Tom McMurtry speaks with reporter Payton Marshall about the need to increase public awareness regarding the mental health crisis that exists within the first responder culture.

“It [House Bill 308] has not been funded yet because there's an actuarial study that is currently in process of taking place. The actuarial study determines how much to put into the fund,” said State Senator Niraj Antani. “It is harder because we don't know how many people may have PTSD or get PTSD, but they [the actuaries] are going to do their best and then we'll fund the system—and then have more funding as needed, we'll put up more funding.”

It's been nearly a 10-year journey to get House Bill 308 to pass and Antani played an instrumental role in getting it to the finish line.

Reporter Payton Marshall asked Antani when House Bill 308 would receive funding and how soon first responders would be able to receive the benefits of the bill. “We will have to pass a bill in order to do it but you know I think we plan to do that,” replied Antani.

Meaning, after the actuary study — funding is not certain until another bill is passed in conclusion to that study.

“You can never guarantee anything right? I mean anything with the way the legislature works, anything can happen but I think the goal would be by the end of the year,” said Antani.

The Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) of Ohio reports another police officer died by suicide in Central Ohio.

“Officers are committing suicide, we have officers in a mental health crisis right now,” said Michael Weinman, Director of Governmental Affairs for the Fraternal Order of Police of Ohio.

This crisis is a reminder on why mental health resources are crucial.

“I really thought that I was fine until something happened to show me that I was being adversely affected by an imperceptible, insidious and potentially deadly force,” said officer McMurtry. “First responders don't go because they don't know. In my opinion increasing public awareness of this issue is the most important thing.”

McMurtry has been receiving treatment from Dr. Platoni. She's a Dayton-area psychologist who specializes in treating post-traumatic stress disorder specifically for those in the military and for first responders.

“This [PTSD] is an actual brain injury that changes the way you process information and in that endeavor, you have flashbacks, you have nightmares, you have intrusive memories, you have an exaggerated hyper, hyper startle response,” said Dr. Platoni.

Some first responders see more traumas in a single day than most people experience in a lifetime. Traumas including homicides, fatal car crashes, child abuse, suicides and domestic violence, just to name a few.

She said ignoring mental health in first responders is becoming deadly.

“I’ve dealt with police suicides in at least two departments and nobody knew that these police officers had reached that point,” said Dr. Platoni. The wounds that don’t bleed are sometimes the most impactful. These are the wounds that take an enormous toll on the psyche.

Although resources like [Blue H.E.L.P.](#) and the [Ruderman Family Foundation](#) report that many or even most first responder suicides go under-reported.

“They [suicide deaths] are not considered a line of duty death you know? In Canada they are considered a line-of-duty death. So there’s no report for all this information, you know? No one’s looking for this information,” said Michael Weinman, Director of Governmental Affairs for the Fraternal Order of Police of Ohio.

Ohio State Rep. Phil Plummer, a former Montgomery County sheriff, said the mental health crisis is a difficult topic to address.

“It’s unfortunate that somebody comes forward and says ‘I need help’ and usually the response is, ‘you’ll get help but we got to shut you down. We got to shut you down due to liability reasons,’” said Plummer.

He continues to carry the traumas from his time as sheriff.

“I’ve been a professional 30 years. There’s stuff ingrained in my brain that will never disappear,” Plummer said.

Plummer was a co-sponsor for House Bill 308. He says many officers fear to come forward due to liability concerns. However, once House Bill 308 receives funding, it will protect officers who seek treatment.

Section 1. C States "No employer shall discharge, demote, reassign, or take any punitive action against any public safety officer because the officer filed a claim or instituted, pursued, or testified in any proceedings related to compensation or benefits paid from the state post traumatic stress fund as a result of a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder received in the course of, and arising out of, employment as a public safety officer but without an accompanying physical injury. Any such officer may file an action in the common pleas court of the county of the officer's employment in which the relief which may be granted shall be limited to reasonable attorney fees and reinstatement with backpay, if the action is based on discharge, or an award for wages lost if based upon demotion, reassignment, or punitive action taken, offset by earnings subsequent to discharge, demotion, reassignment, or punitive action taken. The action shall be forever barred unless filed within one hundred eighty days immediately following the discharge, demotion, reassignment, or punitive action taken, and no action may be instituted or maintained unless the employer has received written notice of a claimed violation of this section within the ninety days immediately following the discharge, demotion, reassignment, or punitive action taken"

Michael Wienman from the state FOP said many officers are scared to come forward.

"There are officers out there who need help, first responders who need help but are afraid to approach their employer. They're afraid of the perception that it will cause," said Wienman.

However, some advocates are frustrated because while the bill passed, there are still financial hurdles.

"We have a lot of work to do on this," Rep. Plummer said.

Sen. Antani said the money will come from the general revenue fund after the state concludes the actuary study at the end of September in 2021.

No taxes will be raised, but before the funding can be received, another bill will need to be passed.

"In legislating sometimes—you know—things take a while and they're complicated and we have to - you know — work out — you know — all of the issues, because — you know — they need to be worked out with due diligence," said Antani.

"It's really telling that — you know — we haven't gotten this done, and it's so frustrating," said Michael Weinman, Director of Governmental Affairs for the Fraternal Order of Police of Ohio.

For the time being, advocates like Phil Plummer are encouraging first responders to speak up if they need help. Officer McMurtry wants others to know his story, in hopes it can inspire them to get help before it's too late.



Dayton 24/7 Now photo: Sinclair College officer Tom McMurtry. McMurtry retired as officer after 15-years with Sinclair College.

He received the Distinguished Action Award for his response during the mass shooting in the Oregon District. Since the global pandemic, McMurtry has returned part-time to his position as a Sinclair College officer.

“In my opinion increasing public awareness of this issue is the most important thing,” said McMurtry. “Mental health does not show. It's not a broken leg, it's not you know a black eye is not something that other people can see.”

-