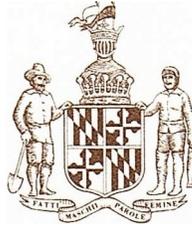


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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES

ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

February 28, 2023

SUPPORT

HB0335 - Workers' Compensation – Occupational Disease Presumptions – First Responders

Dear Chair Wilson, Vice Chair Crosby, and members of the Economic Matters Committee,

9-1-1 Specialists- our first-first responders are among the select group of Marylanders who, on a routine and recurrent basis, are subject to traumatic and harrowing experiences, occasionally interrupted by an event more jolting event. Not surprisingly, the accumulative stress makes protection from burnout and retention of these critical workforce members. We ask a lot of these men and women and offer too little in the way of supporting them in taking care of their own mental health.

HB355 would help them receive PTSD-related health support when needed earlier and more fully by classifying Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a presumptive job-related injury under Worker's Compensation. Early intervention is critical to helping maintain a psychologically healthy emergency response workforce. We spend a great deal of time and resources trying to ensure that the people we recruit and hire for these highly skilled positions with responsibility for interfacing with the public under highly charged and stressful circumstances while maintaining a professional, authoritative, and compassionate demeanor. Doing so requires that they stay emotionally and psychologically healthy, as well as physically fit, well-trained, and current on best-practices. We demand that they perform their jobs at the highest level of their profession and should ensure that they have the tools to do so, including the means to recognize and receive the support needed to process the trauma the encounter.

Documented health impacts of trauma and stress for first responders include PTSD, depression, anxiety, increased suicide risk, burnout, despondency, stress headaches, substance dependence, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and musculoskeletal disorders. For too long, we've operated under a misconception that stresses recognized as "coming with the job" are easily managed by "true" professionals. The corollary being that anyone experiencing health impacts from those stresses was "responsible" for their own health outcomes and not entitled to job related compensation. That there have been few, if any denials of coverage for PTSD workers' compensation cases brought on behalf of firefighters and police suggest that including them in presumption will not significantly impact the cost. However, the Commission as presented with information that 9-1-1 specialist have been more reluctant to file WC claims, largely because assumptions that significant trauma must be experienced onsite and that their auditory experiences don't rise to the level of proof required make it harder to prove the claim. Too many of them deem it simpler to plug away, perhaps seeking treatment through private insurance, or going without treatment until they burnout and leave the profession.

Many of us take measures to limit our exposure to hard to process stress by turning off the news, avoiding replays of certain events, avoiding certain people or situations, changing the channel, or muting the sound. 9-1-1 specialists and other first responders don't have that option. Their incidence of PTSD is estimated to be 18 -24%, currently. With the transition to NexGen 9-1-1 operability, they will be required to process not just audio calls for assistance, but video and images as well. PTSD may not be preventable, but it is treatable and early diagnosis and intervention can halt and reverse progression to debilitating disease.

Workers' compensation presumption for 9-1-1-specialists was a unanimous legislative recommendation of the Commission to Advance Next Generation 911 Across Maryland. In presenting the bill last year, committee member's questions highlighted the fact that they are not alone in their exposure risk to PTSD-triggering events. Like the cancer risk for firefighters, significant trauma due to their life-saving public service jobs, **HB335** proposes to include the following first responders and those of other occupations subject to similar repeated highly stressful encounters:

- Firefighters
- Emergency Medical Services Providers
- Rescue Squad Members
- Sworn members of the Office of the State First Marshall
- Members of a Volunteer or Rescue Company who is a covered employee under Workers' Compensation Law
- 9-1-1 Specialists
- Law Enforcement Officers
- Correctional Officers

Eligibility for this presumption would require the worker be diagnosed by a psychologist or psychiatrist; has completed at least 2 years of cumulative service in Maryland as a first responder; and has filed the claim while employed as a first responder or within the 18 months immediately following separation from employment.

First responders are essential to the health and well-being of our residents, and it is important that we recognize and support the people who provide key services in such extremely stressful conditions. This is needed not only to support those we are currently suffering but to also establish an environment that promotes hiring and retention of these workers so that essential services are available when needed.

Under **HB335**, First Responders would still have to prove job-related causality to receive workers compensation benefits for the other, often seen health effects, but there would be a presumption that a diagnosis of PTSD is related to the job. This is supported by the data, it is appropriate, it is common, and it is the right thing to do for those who do so much for our families, constituents, and communities. I personally would like us to do more. I strongly urge that we at least do this.

I ask for a favorable report on **HB335**.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "D. P. ...", located below the text "I ask for a favorable report on HB335."