

Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 1023

Submitted by Matthew Coster, President
Baltimore Firefighters IAFF Local 734

Chair Beidle, Vice Chair Hayes, and esteemed members of the Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of Senate Bill 1023. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to Senator Jackson for sponsoring this critical piece of legislation.

My name is Matthew Coster, and I serve as the President of Baltimore Firefighters IAFF Local 734. Today, I am offering personal testimony on why this bill is not only important to me but also essential for the well-being of my fellow firefighters.

In January 2022, our department suffered an unimaginable tragedy when we lost three firefighters who courageously battled a house fire on Stricker Street in West Baltimore. At the time, I was serving as a Battalion Steward with Local 734. I was just waking up when I began receiving an overwhelming number of texts and calls alerting me to a major structural collapse, with multiple firefighters missing and injured.

Amidst the chaos, I learned that one of those missing was Lieutenant Paul Butrim—one of my best friends. I immediately reached out to his wife, Rachel, to offer support and gather any information she had. The Fire Department planned to send an EMS Lieutenant to assist her, but I assured both Rachel and the department that I would take on this responsibility myself.

I rushed to their home, arriving to find Rachel surrounded by friends and family, overcome with grief. She pleaded with me to take her to the scene, and despite my initial hesitation, I ultimately honored her request. I drove Rachel and her loved ones to the fireground, where we stood for hours as our colleagues desperately worked to locate Paul in the rubble.

Approximately nine hours after the collapse, Paul was found. Tragically, he had succumbed to his injuries. Delivering this heartbreaking news to Rachel was one of the most difficult and humbling moments of my life. Together, we watched as Paul was brought out of the building, draped in the Fire Department flag. We then accompanied him in the back of the medic unit as he was transported to the Medical Examiner's Office.

The weight of that day—and the days that followed—took an immense toll on me. While supporting Rachel and Paul's family, I was also grappling with my own grief. As time went on, I began experiencing severe anxiety and sleepless nights, symptoms I had never encountered before. When the funeral services concluded and daily life resumed, these struggles persisted. At my wife's urging, I sought professional help from a doctor recommended by our Peer Support Coordinator—one of the best in our profession.

I was diagnosed with PTSD and anxiety. My doctor recommended medical cannabis as an appropriate treatment; however, due to workplace prohibitions, this option was not available to me. Instead, I was left with limited alternatives, many of which carried serious side effects I was unwilling to endure. As a result, I remain medically untreated for my symptoms to this day.

I chose to lead this Local because I am committed to advocating for the health and well-being of my members. Firefighters, paramedics, EMTs, and first responders endure countless traumatic incidents that take a profound toll on both their mental and physical health. Denying them access to a medically prescribed treatment—one that could significantly improve their quality of life—not only exacerbates their struggles but also places an undue burden on their families.

I appreciate this committee's time and consideration of my personal experience, and I respectfully urge you to issue a favorable report on Senate Bill 1023.

Thank you.