

Written Testimony - May 5th - Finance Committee

I want to share my story as a duty disabled, former police officer whose life was forever changed by being shot in the line of duty.

It was July 19th 2018, a day that began like any other day in my 7 years as a police officer. I had just turned 30, and I was assigned the new unmarked squad. It was my "Friday," and I was heading up to the cabin with friends after work.

Around noon, my partner got dispatched to a call about a previously missing adult who had just returned home. I decided to tag along.

As we were speaking with the reporting party, we were ambushed by the missing person. He had returned with a shotgun, intent on killing as many people as possible. I was immediately shot in the leg, but I refused to give up. Despite the pain, I fought back, engaging in a five-minute gun battle with a man whose only intent was murder. Only after running out of ammunition did he surrender.

That day, my life was forever changed.

My physical wounds healed and I returned to work, but my mental health deteriorated.

As time went on, the injuries to my mental health grew worse. I had dedicated my life to serving and protecting my community, but now I was the one who needed protection and support. Support for the emotional trauma that followed, the nightmares, the flashbacks, the anxiety, and the depression that I couldn't shake off. After years of battling and fighting to stay in the career I had loved, I finally had the courage to begin the process of applying for a duty disability.

The process of applying for a duty disability was almost as traumatizing as the horrific events that caused it. I was required to see a psychologist of PERA's choice for an "independent evaluation". I spent hours reliving the traumas that caused me to seek a duty disability.

At the end of my session with PERA's psychologist, the psychologist asked me, "Why are you looking at me so scared? It's not like I'm pointing a gun at you." PERA's application and evaluation process left me feeling unsupported, helpless, and alone. I went home that night and felt so desperate that I put a Glock 43 in my mouth, ready to kill myself.

I nearly died in service to my state, and I should have been supported. Instead, my trauma and my injuries were minimized, and PERA's position was that my pain did not matter. The state's lack of compassion and understanding only added to my suffering.

Eventually I managed to obtain duty disability benefits and left the career I loved. I struggled to get back on my feet. Through countless hours of therapy, and years of trying different medications, I have fought every day to reclaim some resemblance of normalcy in my life. It has not been easy, and I still fight every day to make progress, slowly but surely. When I heard about House file 1234, everything came crashing down.

This bill proposes monetary penalties that will impact me and countless other disabled police officers in Minnesota. **It will devastate me financially. I will no longer be able to afford the home I purchased based on the promise of benefits I would receive.** It will eliminate

any incentive for me or any other disabled officers to return to work. Ultimately, the state will be paying out more by penalizing us for finding new employment.

The creators of this bill state they don't want duty disabled officers to make more than their active counterparts. When I had to take a duty disability I was #1 on the sergeant's promotion list. I will never see that 20% increase of income. I will never be able to use that as my high 5. In addition, my duty disability increases by 1% a year whereas active members increase by 3-4% a year! When someone my age retires at age 55 their pension will be significantly higher than mine ever will be.

The bill has already begun to destroy the improved mental health state I have worked so hard to achieve by forcing me to relive the events that nearly took my life. It is a cruel and heartless bill that shows an utter lack of compassion and understanding for what we have gone through.

We have already sacrificed so much in service to our communities. We put our lives on the line every day to keep our neighborhoods safe. We have seen things that most people could never imagine, things that haunt us every day. And yet, instead of being valued and supported, this bill shows that the state believes we are disposable, and our sacrifices do not matter.

Do not support House File 1234 in its current form. Consider the sacrifices that disabled first responders like me have made for our communities, and acknowledge the toll that this work has taken on our physical and mental health.

We need your support, not your punishment. We need your recognition, not your rejection. Please, do not turn your back on us. Do not let us down.

We are not asking for special treatment; we are asking for what was promised to us.

We are not just police officers, firefighters, and medics; we are human beings with families, hopes, and dreams.

We deserve better than this. We are tired, and we have nothing left to give.

Rep. Mary Murphy (DFL-Hermantown) said in 2021, "The most important thing to remember about pensions is that they are promises made that must be kept."

Derek Kruse