

My name is Dallas Moeller, and I would like to share my story and some information about the impact that SF1959 will have on disabled first responders in the State of Minnesota. I have been advised that this letter will be included in the handouts for the Senate State and Local Government and Veterans Committee hearing of SF1959 on May 3rd, 2023, and I appreciate the opportunity to have my voice heard.

In December of 2019, my career in law enforcement came to an end after being diagnosed with PTSD. I absolutely loved my career, and the effort that I put into it is proof. I was a team lead on SWAT, a field training officer, a use of force instructor, and a member of the departments honor guard team, all at the same time. Law enforcement was my life. I worked every opportunity I could and was good at my job. However, being a police officer often comes at a cost. Throughout my career I saw many horrific events and came face to face with the evil that does exist in this world. I began my career as an innocent twenty-three year old whom you would not recognize today. While my career was rewarding and brought me a strong sense of purpose, it was almost like a drug. Much like an addict, I did not see myself getting sicker and sicker as my career progressed, even though relationships that I once had were beginning to crumble apart. Slowly, my life was closing in on me and I felt as if no one understood me, including my own family. While I still loved being a police officer, inside I wanted out but didn't know how because being a police officer had become my life. I was sick of the suicides, homicides, death notifications, and death in general. I was sick of putting on a uniform and pretending that things didn't bother me. One of the last calls that I took as a police officer was of a teenager who attempted to commit suicide. Listening to this teenage female tell me about the deep pains in her life I realized that I connected with her on a different level. I had similar

pains and feelings of hopelessness. After putting this female on a mental health hold, I sat in my squad car in a park all alone crying uncontrollably. Here I was, a police officer who was supposed to help people, but I didn't even know how to help myself. In the days that followed, I was obsessed with the feelings that this conversation had caused. It was like a spark that had turned into a roaring fire inside of me. I couldn't take it any longer and needed out. I made a plan that I was going to crash my patrol vehicle and take my own life so that my family would be taken care of through my life insurance policy. There would be no note left for my wife and two beautiful daughters because that would affect the payout of my life insurance since it would be ruled a suicide. I had my plan and was ready for the hurting to stop.

After nearly executing my plan in the following days, I asked for help. I had a close friend that was seeing a psychologist that he trusted for mental health issues, and I finally told him about the darkness in my life. I was scared but knew that it was time for me to save my own life and get the help that I desperately needed. When I went to see my psychologist for the first time, I couldn't even talk without getting choked up with tears. After our initial meeting, my psychologist advised me that she did not feel that I was safe to be working and that she was going to have me taken off of work for the next two weeks so that we could meet again. While this terrified me because now my mental health issue was going to become public, for the first time I felt that I had someone on my side that could help me. After meeting with my psychologist for a second time she took me off of work for a year and advised that she would like for me to be evaluated for post-traumatic stress disorder.

In the following months, I was evaluated by two separate doctors and both doctors diagnosed me with work related PTSD. After the first diagnosis I submitted an injury report to

my department and shortly after was denied my workers compensation claim because the insurance company disagreed with the doctor's diagnosis. Through my attorney, I then submitted paperwork for a medical retirement through my police pension plan which is through the public employee's retirement association (PERA) and was approved without any issues in December of 2019. At that time my benefits were explained and given to me.

Since being accepted for medical retirement, my workers compensation claim has been accepted after yet another psychologist hired by the insurance company diagnosed me with work related PTSD (the third time now) and they were forced to accept my claim. After many months of therapy, I re-entered the workforce as a door dash delivery driver because it offered me the flexibility to work when I was able to due to my ongoing mental status. While this job was a big step in my healing, it was short lived because I did not get any sense of purpose from it. I knew that I needed a job that would allow me to continue to have an impact on society and that gave me a sense of purpose. The first idea that came to my head was to become an elementary school teacher. I felt that this career would fulfill the sense of purpose I was so desperately needing. In the fall of 2020, I obtained my substitute teachers license and was hired at a local charter school that had just opened. After the second day working at the school, as I walked out to my truck in the parking lot, I realized that my mouth was hurting because it had been a long time since I had smiled so much. This was when I realized that teaching was what was going to give me my life back. After a couple of months substituting a couple days a week, I was offered a full-time job as a substitute teacher and paraprofessional. After some discussion with my psychologist, I was released to work full time at the school but was advised that I

would be monitored, and my restrictions would change if it impacted my mental health in a negative way. I was so excited to be back to work and on the right path again.

While working at the school, I began to work with my qualified rehabilitation consultant to go back to college to obtain my teaching degree so that I could have the possibility of returning to what workers compensation considers 'gainful employment'. Although it would not bring me the same income that my previous job had provided, the income that I was collecting from PERA would bring me close to what I had been earning when I left my career as a police officer. After extensive job searching and more evaluations, this time from vocational experts, the insurance company agreed to pay for me to get my Master of Arts in elementary education through Concordia University. I am currently one year away from graduation and have a conditional job offer as an elementary school teacher from the charter school upon completion of my degree.

Unfortunately, I heard about the proposed changes to my PERA benefits through HF1234/SF1959 a little over a month ago. These changes will bring financial hardships and have already had a devastating impact on my mental health. I felt that I was doing the right thing, getting my life back together and giving back to society. Leaving my career was not a choice, and I wish I could still be a police officer, but this was the best alternative that I had. Getting my teaching degree would allow me to make supplemental income so that the deficit from my former job would be lessened. I recently called a PERA representative to find out how these offsets will impact me, and I learned that two-thirds of the income that I would be making as a starting teacher would be taken because of both offsets. That is nearly \$40,000. I have been repeatedly told that this legislation is about fairness and that it is unfair if I make \$1 more than

any active contributing member. This legislation does not consider the standard of living I had when I was a police officer and the amount of money that I was making in overtime. It also does not consider the promotions I would have been able to pursue and the increased income I would be currently making if I would not have been forced to leave my career. I am now going to be limited to making no more than the base salary that I was making at the time I was forced to leave my career. The representative calculated my earnings from the current system and even with the potential of my new earnings, I was still making less than what I would be currently making as a police officer. The one question that I asked the representative is how I can make the same amount of money that I was before becoming disabled and after a very long pause he told me that I would need to find employment that offered that type of pay. My question is where? I understand that the legislation in part is trying to prevent those on disability from making more than they were as a police officer, but it doesn't allow for people to have the potential to even make the same income, which is the opposite of fair. I have been struggling to understand the 'fairness' in how I was forced to leave my career and will now make less than two-thirds of what I was as a police officer. I have a disability that I have worked hard to control, but my efforts are being threatened. The current system is in place to help individuals that have been injured regain gainful employment, but this legislation is threatening that. I am frustrated when I hear that the 'stakeholders' have been working on this legislation at meetings that I knew nothing about. The retroactive portion of HF1234/SF1959 takes back the promises I was made when I left the career four years ago and began to set up my new life. I was told what my benefits were and built my life around that, but now that is being threatened. Is this really the thanks that I get for giving my life to my profession? Is this the

thanks that I get for waking up nearly every night because of vivid memories? Is this the thanks that I get for trying to get my life back? I am not trying to take advantage of 'the system' I am only trying to provide for my family financially in the same way I was able to before the injury. Please remember that the implications of HF1234 will be permanent and will not account for the growing inflation. The president of PERA has already stated that these offsets will likely have no significant impact because of the low percentage of the people that are collecting disability. There have been so many false statements or misrepresentations when this legislation was presented that it makes me sick to my stomach.

There is so much more that I would like to say but I will leave you with this. Law enforcement changed my life in many ways. I am proud that I served my community for over fifteen years, but that came at a cost. HF1234 is again going to cost me and my family further hardship and distress that me and my family do deserve. If you have any questions or would like to talk further, I will include my phone number.

Sincerely,

Dallas Moeller

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