



Mark Meek
State Senator
District 20

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Chair Taylor, Vice Chair Bonham, and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to present Senate Bill 588 before you today.

I want to begin by recognizing Sean and Karen Ellis, who have also come to testify in support. I first met Sean and Karen in 2022 while knocking doors during my campaign. As I stood on their doorstep, I listened to their story—a story of dedication, sacrifice, and the unimaginable obstacles they have faced in seeking the benefits that Sean earned through his service. I was deeply moved and, frankly, troubled. Here was a family that had given so much to our community, yet they were being left behind by a system that should be supporting them. I told Sean and Karen that day that I would to help, and for the past two and a half years, I have worked alongside them to find a resolution.

Yet, despite our efforts, their fight for justice remains unfinished—which is why we are here today. SB 588 is not just about the Ellis'. **It is about every police officer and firefighter in Oregon who has dedicated their lives to protecting our communities, only to find themselves abandoned when they need help the most.**

Under Oregon law, police officers and firefighters receive special pension benefits through the Public Employees Retirement System (PERS) due to the unique risks and hazards they face. Yet, when those very risks result in a disabling condition—such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) sustained in the line of duty—PERS does not consistently recognize it as a valid, compensable injury.

We have seen what happens as a result:

- **First responders are forced to fight for years to receive benefits they are entitled to.** Mr. Ellis filed his claim with PERS in March 2021. Despite overwhelming medical evidence and the approval of his federal Social Security disability claim, PERS denied his application in December 2021. He appealed in January 2022. Three years later, he is still waiting for a final decision.
- **PERS fails to meet its own deadlines.** Mr. Ellis has received ten letters from PERS over three years, each delaying their decision by another 30 to 90 days. This is an unacceptable burden on any family.
- **The process lacks transparency and accountability.**

This is not how we should be treating the men and women who risk their lives for us. **We can and must do better.**

SB 588 provides urgently needed reforms to ensure that first responders receive timely and fair consideration of their disability claims:

1. Recognizes PTSD as an Occupational Injury

For the first time, SB 588 explicitly recognizes that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an injury sustained in the line of duty for police officers and firefighters under PERS. This aligns Oregon's pension system with its workers' compensation system, which already acknowledges PTSD as a work-related condition.

2. Establishes Clear Timelines for Hearings

If a police officer or firefighter requests a contested case hearing to dispute a final denial of their disability retirement allowance, the Public Employees Retirement Board (PERS Board) must hold the hearing within 90 days of the request—or, if there is good cause for delay, within 180 days at the latest. If the hearing does not occur within this timeframe, the first responder automatically prevails. This ensures that first responders are not left waiting indefinitely for a decision on their disability claims.

3. Requires PERS to Address Backlogged Cases

The bill directs PERS to hold all outstanding contested case hearings for police and fire disability appeals within 180 days of the bill's effective date. This means that cases like Mr. Ellis', which have been languishing for years, will finally receive the attention and resolution they deserve.

We are talking about first responders: Individuals who stood in the line of fire, rushed into burning buildings, and put their lives on the line to protect our communities. When their service takes a toll—when their injuries force them out of the profession they dedicated their lives to—we owe it to them to provide the benefits they earned.

This is not a handout. **This is a promise. A promise we made when these individuals signed up to serve, and a promise we must now uphold.**

Colleagues, we have a choice before us today: We can continue allowing these men and women to suffer under a broken system, or we can take decisive action to ensure no other first responder has to endure what the Ellis' have endured.

SB 588 is about dignity, fairness, and respect. It is about ensuring that when our first responders are injured in the line of duty, we do not turn our backs on them. This bill will not change what Sean and Karen have been through already. But if we pass it, we can ensure that no other first responder in Oregon must endure the same delays, denials, and injustices.

I urge your support for SB 588. Thank you.

Respectfully,



Mark Meek
State Senator – District 20