

Good morning, Chair Taylor and committee members. My name is Karen Ellis and I am married to Sean. I would like to express my deep gratitude for giving us the opportunity to testify and present SB 588 with Sen. Meek. We are very grateful for Sen. Meek's commitment to Sean and our family in spearheading and sponsoring this bill. I would also like to acknowledge that some of the things in my testimony maybe triggering and ask that the committee and others in the room please be understanding if Sean and anyone else needs to excuse themselves.

Sean and I have been married for over 22yrs, he is my partner in life, my best friend, the dad to our two amazing boys, ages 16 & 17. They are what keeps him fighting everyday. We are before you today because Sean is suffering from Chronic Post Traumatic Stress Disorder sustained in the line of duty throughout his years of service as a police officer in Oregon. As the wife of a police officer, you know in your head there may come a day that life as you know it will never be the same, but your heart doesn't understand or accept it until it has to. That day for us was November 3rd, 2013. I will never forget hearing our boys, ages 5 & 6, play quietly in their rooms when I received the call from another officer's wife. Sean was in a critical incident and the reserve officer riding with him had been shot.

That day in 2013 was more than likely the first traumatic brain injury to his psyche and when I noticed him begin to change. It was then followed by five years in the detective unit, where investigations included murder, abuse, and terrible crimes against children. Five years investigating some of the darkest evil and ugliness of society.

His detective assignment completed in 2019 and he went back to the road as a patrolman. On a night in February 2020, a domestic violence call escalated, and Sean went to assist. As he arrived on scene, shots fired came over the radio. Sprinting in full gear, rifle in hand, Sean tripped on a broken sidewalk and fell to the ground damaging his left knee. Though I don't think he realized it at the time, it took him back to that day in 2013 and all the horrible images and feelings that haunt him. The knee injury kept him home and unable to work for months. He was becoming unrecognizable to me as I watched the mood swings became greater, the night terrors return, anxiety heightened, and the deafening silence that surrounded him and hung so thick in our home until something would set him off and the storm that followed filled that silence like a freight train. All of this in the midst of the pandemic that kept him from access to knee surgery. Little did we know that day would be his last day putting on the uniform of this honorable profession. In September of 2020 Sean filed a Workers Comp claim due to PTSD, and by October the claim was accepted.

Our boys don't remember what Sean was like before PTSD descended on our home, but they know they must adjust to Dad's bad days, they apologize when they accidentally drop something, they warn him if they are going to do something loud, they don't sneak up or stand behind him, they are learning where he needs to sit in a restaurant or public place. The joy Sean once had for watching our boys play sports has been taken from him as he struggles in the crowds, the noise, and the chaos. This is a terrible consequence of doing this job, the price paid for the acute and repeated exposures to trauma. To watch your loved one struggle, to suffer an illness no one can see and very few can comprehend, is utterly heartbreaking. It does not have visual cues for people to see . . . No brace, crutches, wheelchair, or physical scar. This makes it incredibly hard for people on the outside to understand.

It took Sean nearly a year to even entertain the idea that he may not make it back and agree to file for PERS (filed 3/2021) and Social Security (filed 8/2021) disability. We had been told PERS was a 3-9 month process, so we had hopes PERS would come through shortly after the city separated Sean in September of 2021. However, PERS sent an official denial in December of 2021. Our attorney then filed Sean's appeal and additional documentation in January 2022. PERS responded they would have a decision or hearing date within 90 days. We are now 3 years from filing the appeal, having provided all supporting documentation from clinician notes to tax returns, and still no final decision. Over the last 3 years we have received 10 letters of delay from PERS ranging anywhere from 30-90 days.

After Senator Meek started inquiring with PERS about their timelines, they began acknowledging us in a new way. They asked for a new Medical Releases due to Sean's expiring from their delay. They asked both of Sean's doctors for 2-3yrs of documentation and gave them 15days to respond, to which they both complied. This is evidence that they had not even given his file a cursory review in that 3 yrs. This also implies they have not reviewed the documentation provided by our attorney at the time of appeal. Something that is so important to supporting our family, has been treated with little care for the humanity and dignity of Sean and those like him. Toss the papers in a file and hope the applicant disappears. Trauma informed care is non-existent in the PERS process.

How can it be that instead of supporting and honoring First Responders, PERS disrespects them by hiding behind loopholes or inadequacies in Statute and Administrative Rule . . . dragging processes on so long that some just give up? To be blunt, this is *Sean's* pension money we are asking for, that he *earned* and is part of the benefits package for serving and protecting Oregon communities. Is this the

message we want to send to First Responders, that they are just a badge number, a work horse until they are irreparably harmed by the job, and then just discarded with no respect or acknowledgment for their sacrifice?!

Our life has been in limbo since February of 2020 when Sean went off work for the knee injury and then September 2020 for PTSD. The financial uncertainty and strain has taken a huge toll as we have had to obtain and pay for our own medical insurance after losing it from the city. We spent over \$6500 on an attorney to work on Sean's appeal. Caring for Sean, managing these tedious claims, raising our boys makes it impossible for me to work full-time outside of the home. We never thought this would drag on so long that we would be facing our oldest applying to colleges and it is uncertain how we will make that happen. Yet here we are.

SB 588 is critical for Oregon Police Officers and Firefighters. Including the diagnosis of PTSD due to duty exposure, either one incident or cumulative over a career, is long overdue. This bill will help provide dignity and respect to the sacrifice First Responders make and help diminish the stigma. Currently, PERS administrative rule acknowledges "work related stress" but not PTSD. That designation is insufficient to the quantity and nature of trauma first responders face over the course of their careers. Police Officers and Firefighters are not the same as general service members of PERS, so it is imperative to acknowledge and include the diagnosis of PTSD as an injury and occupational disease sustained in the line of duty.

It is of the utmost importance that disability applications and appeals be processed in a timely, fair and efficient manner. This bill will provide the support and relief families like ours need. It will be reassurance to First Responders that they will not be in limbo for years on end, that life can move forward, and they will not lose everything when a career ending injury or disease strikes.

Chair Taylor and committee members, it is our plea that you would pass this important bill this year. We understand it may or may not help Sean's case, but we have great hope it will help Police Officers and Firefighters who face similar struggles. If we can help pave a smoother path for others and do something good with what Sean and our family have been through, then that is what is important and will be Sean's act of service to his fellow First Responders.