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Testimony on Senate Bill 22-005
Before the Committee on the Judiciary,
Colorado Senate
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Chairman Lee, Ranking Member Gardner, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss with you today the importance of providing critical tools to Colorado's law enforcement agencies to support our peace officers—offering both greater resources to ensure we keep good officers in the ranks, as well as supporting their mental health as they perform what is one of the most traumatic and difficult jobs in our communities.

I am very grateful to Senator Jeff Bridges and Senator John Cooke for bringing Senate Bill 22-005 ("SB 22-005") to address these important issues. And I urge your support.

Recruitment and Retention

The last two years took a particularly heavy toll on frontline workers, asking first responders, health care workers, and others to risk their lives and work in traumatic situations. These frontline workers, such as peace officers, selflessly answered that call to serve our communities.

As attorney general, I chair the Peace Officer Standards and Training Board ("POST Board"). In my time as chair, we prioritized recruiting peace officers and encouraging young people to enter this important profession. This is a timely and important goal. Having an adequate number of peace officers—especially those who are well qualified and well trained—serving our communities is vital to ensuring community safety.

There are several initiatives within the Department of Law currently underway to improve and expand our efforts to recruit and support peace officers. For example, in my second year in office we sought legislative authority from you to stand up a new funding stream to support training academy scholarships for new

recruits for rural law enforcement agencies. And in the last year, we launched a public service announcement series to demonstrate to peace officer recruits why experienced police and sheriffs were motivated to enter this profession. This tool is being used now to support current officers and encourage young people to consider careers in law enforcement.

By necessity, law enforcement agency budgets are geared toward the essentials of day-to-day operations to keep their communities safe. This bill was developed to build on those efforts and provide new resources to support a new recruitment and retention pilot program. This investment would allow us to build on the past pilot programs I mentioned, as well as providing new funding opportunities directly to law enforcement agencies to receive state support to recruit and keep good officers on their forces.

Law enforcement agencies have expertise in their field, but they may not have the resources to conduct forward leaning recruitment efforts. Through this new funding opportunity, the State can encourage the use of promising recruitment strategies that not only encourage qualified individuals to enter the profession, but that also diversify law enforcement ranks. This funding opportunity can also create synergy between the grant recipient agencies, resulting in a coordinated statewide effort that helps every agency while also respecting the specific recruiting needs of individual communities.

Mental Health Services

Before I discuss the second part of this bill regarding peace officer mental health support, let me discuss our ongoing work on improving officer training. For the first time in forty years, my office is re-evaluating the core competencies and skills peace officers need to be successful. This will ensure that the traditional law enforcement skills taught now integrate new skills that are best practices, including de-escalation tactics.

One of the concepts that will be a foundation of the new academy training curriculum is officer mental health and awareness. To highlight the importance of this training, let me relate a story told to me by a Colorado police chief. He shared that, in an excessive force case his department experienced, there was a backstory about mental health and awareness training. In this case, an officer visited a home where child abuse had occurred. This experience left a deep and traumatic impact on that officer. After he left that home, at a subsequent incident the officer used excessive force. As a result, a needless tragedy took place and that officer's career ended. With better mental health and support resources as well as adequate mental health and awareness training, this tragedy may have been prevented.

We are committed to investing in training to help our peace officers identify when their colleagues, or they themselves, are not okay and in need of help. To that end, we are working to bring “bystander training” to Colorado, providing peace officers with tools and strategies on how to better assess their and their partners’ emotional states. In the situation I mentioned above, such awareness would likely have led that officer to sit out after enduring a traumatic situation.

Committing to provide mental health services to all peace officers promises to improve not only policing effectiveness and safety, but also peace officers’ quality of life and retention. For too many peace officers, the message has been, and continues to be, “tough it out.” No one would ever suggest that approach to a person fighting a disease or when dealing with a tragedy. And we shouldn’t take that approach to mental health either. This bill takes an important step in changing this narrative.

Peace officers enter the profession with a desire to serve and care for their community. But peace officers see and often internalize trauma, and their health suffers. Providing every peace officer the mental health support they need, and deserve, can help officers and their families, and allow them to better serve their communities.

Presently we have some support structures for peace officer mental health. But it’s clear that we need to bolster these resources. Over the last 5 years, nearly 1,000 peace officers took their own lives nationwide.¹ Peace officer suicides occur at alarming rates. They put their lives and safety on the lines, and they endure some of the most traumatic situations imaginable—which clearly is a driver of this devastating trend. In fact, peace officer suicides now exceed the total number of officers feloniously killed on the job. We must build on past efforts and provide greater tools to law enforcement agencies to combat these needless deaths.

SB 22-005 provides an important investment for peace officer mental health by leveraging the existing program operated by the Department of Local Affairs. With this enhanced funding, I am confident that it will be a win several times over—in public safety and in peace officers’ quality of life and ability to do their jobs safely.

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In this hearing you will also see an amendment that is designed to pair this legislation with other complementary bills to support Colorado’s peace officers—particularly the recruitment and retention component. We collaborated with Governor Polis and the sponsors to achieve what I believe to be a sound and robust

¹ See <https://bluehelp.org/>.

set of bills to ensure law enforcement agencies have the tools they need to ensure we keep and support well trained and qualified officers and sheriffs in their ranks in a coordinated and thoughtful manner. I am grateful to all these parties for their leadership in ensuring this legislative session delivers a significant increase in resources and support for those who wear the badge.

We are at an important moment for law enforcement. Officers, sheriffs, troopers, and marshals all serve the public, and they do so under traumatic and challenging circumstances. They deserve our continued admiration and gratitude for their service. But that's not enough. We must provide greater tools and resources at the state level to support local law enforcement agencies. That's why I'm proud to support SB 22-005 which is a sound investment in public safety and our peace officers.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit these comments to you today in support of SB 22-005.