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March 31, 2024

Greetings Committee Chair and members of the Interim Finance Committee,

My name is Paul Lunkwitz, President of FOP Nevada C.O. Lodge 21. As the 2nd largest law enforcement union in Nevada, we represent close to 1,000 members and two bargaining units totaling roughly 1,600 Peace Officers. I am submitting my strong support in reference to the Peer Support program which is an action item (NDOC SCAAP re-allocation under Section 7) for consideration on the April 11th, 2024 agenda. I was a Correctional Officer for 21 years prior to retiring in 2021. During my time in corrections, I worked just about every assignment you could at Southern Desert Correctional Center, High Desert State Prison, and Central Transportation. I was a CERT Officer, Search and Escort, and Segregation housing unit officer for the majority of my career. While on Transportation, I completed extraditions that included picking up inmates in Illinois, Wyoming, California, and Arizona. Some of those included flying armed on a commercial airplane with a convicted felon in full restraints. I have seen the inside of prisons outside of Nevada and I have been to every single prison in Nevada, including the ones that are closed and most of the minimum security camps.

As a part of my duties as the President of FOP Lodge 21, I can tell you that I have had the pleasure of speaking to law enforcement officers from all over the country during FOP National Conferences in New Orleans, Indianapolis, and Las Vegas. I can honestly say that I have a wealth of experience talking with and hearing many different perspectives on corrections and law enforcement throughout the country. The constant that exists throughout the country is that officers feel there is no place to turn for help with their mental well being. I have personally had officers

open up to me about things that they are experiencing. They share with me that no one understands what they are going through.

While I am more than willing to provide an understanding ear, I am not trained nor qualified to address the greater issues that they face when they are alone, tormented inside their own head, or facing thoughts of suicide. Yes, I have talked to officers who are on the ledge and I have done my part to pull them back to a place where they were ok for the time being. I have spent hours on the phone, gripped by the fear that they will take their own life, while they explain how hopeless they feel. Thankfully, those who have reached out to me were able to find a mental wellness professional that could guide them forward.

I have established a relationship with a professional who agreed to volunteer to help those that I referred. On a small scale, this is exactly what the peer support program will help accomplish. We will provide officers a safe place to reach out to a trusted peer. Their peers can get the officer aligned with a wellness professional, if the officer needs more intensive treatment. The program will also provide evidenced based programming and additionally a well-ness app that will be available to officers and their loved ones. At the moment, officers do not have a safe place to turn when their days get darkest... The EAP system, per the research, and personal experience is failing Officers in our state.

We have had multiple suicides by officers over the last year or so. There are officers who struggle daily with the pressures of this career field. The stigma that exists that we are supposed to be tough, we are supposed to be the ones helping others, and we shouldn't need someone to help us, has a crippling effect on us all. The baggage that we all carry around isn't just for the period of time while on active duty. As I stated earlier, I retired in 2021, but I am still dealing with the traumas that I experienced in my career. I would like you to close your eyes after reading each of the following memories, and see if you can picture what these situations look like. Try to imagine the smell that is associated with each situation. Think about the sounds that come along with these situations. Keep in mind that you only have split seconds to react to save lives.

- Have any of you ever helped carry a guy on a backboard that was stabbed 57 times and had a compound fracture of his wrist from falling to the floor?
- Have you ever had feces and urine thrown at you?
- Have you ever had to respond to a housing unit where there is a fire threatening to kill everyone inside?
- How about physically dragging inmates out of a situation where other inmates were going to kill them?
- Have you responded to a unit full of inmates ready to fight and refusing to lock up?
- How about running as hard as you can to respond to a fellow officer who is being attacked?
- Have you been assaulted, used force to defend yourself, or been screamed at, "We're gonna kill you!"?

If you had a visceral emotional response to these scenarios, that is because you should, they are violent and evil. After picturing what those things may look, smell, or sound like, imagine that you can't just forget those things. These memories and more are stuck with me for the rest of my life. Despite facing all of those things with valor and professionalism during my career, I still found myself scrutinized by superiors, criticized for the way that I did things, and yes sued by those I helped. Let me tell you that those examples are just a tip of the iceberg, and our officers find themselves in these positions regularly.

Now imagine that after being subject to all of that, you have to come home to your family and turn that switch off. You have to ignore the demons that are trying to drag you down so that you can put on a smile for your kids, your wife, and your friends. Unfortunately, those things do not just go away while you're masking your traumas. So what do most officers do to try and maintain a normal appearance? We self medicate with booze, pills, and tobacco. I personally found myself addicted to tobacco and alcohol all the way until my heart literally gave out. That's right, almost two years into my retirement, I experienced Heart Failure. I found myself in a hospital being told that my heart was pumping at 4%. The normal rate is between 50-70%, so I was pretty much dead. Oh and in case you were curious, I was only 44 years old.

Thanks to a week in the hospital and a few procedures, I am a year removed from that terrifying situation. I am happy to say I found what I needed to stay sober, but the truth is I wish I would have had a strong support option available, like peer support. Instead of coping by self medication, I could have found healthy outlets for my baggage. I shouldn't have needed a near death experience to turn my life around. Neglecting one's mental well being has a physical consequence for everyone, but especially for our officers. I didn't believe it or more accurately I didn't want to believe it. We have to change this culture and we have to eliminate this stigma.

Peer Support is more than just another option, it is a movement in law enforcement. Do any of you know what the number one cause of death is in law enforcement officers? It is not being killed in the line of duty and it is not even heart disease. The number one cause of death for officers is suicide and the number increases every year. Even if it wasn't the number one cause of death, just being in the top 15 would still be appalling. We need to take care of our officers plain and simple. Many do not know how to get help with what they experience. Even worse, they are unwilling to reach out to the available mechanisms because they do not trust anyone. This is where peer support comes into play. With the combined efforts of the State of Nevada and FOP, we will build this program into a successful support resource that helps officers who keep the community safe. We can reach officers as their union, because we either were or still are officers. We have walked through the same mud(that's not mud) and we have been through the same types of violent situations. We can publicize it through our channels to get the participation that is essential. Officers need to acquire the tools that will help them successfully transition from hyper-vigilance to home life. We will give officers the mechanism to deal with the things that they can't talk about with friends or family. With proper training and resources, we can have valuable assets throughout Nevada to affect real change.

The National FOP has done surveys of 5,555 officers throughout the country. Of the **voluntary** mental wellness options that are available like EAP, Chaplaincy Services, or substance abuse programs, Peer Support is the most used wellness program. The only "wellness mechanisms" that are used more, are mandatory. Supervisor Debriefings, Training Classes,

and Mandatory Annual Mental Wellness Check Ups, are examples of some of the mandatory wellness mechanisms. Some of these apply to Nevada while others do not. What you must consider is that these mandatory mechanisms do not work to actually help officers. You should understand that officers view these things as the state checking off their boxes, rather than trying to help the individual. Officers feel as if the state is just limiting their financial liability. As long as there is a liability(i.e. losing their job), hanging over the officer, you will continue to get zero actual participation. Officers will continue to give the answers that are needed to close the file or flat out refuse to participate.

**WE ARE NOT OK**, but with your help we absolutely can get there. On behalf of all our FOP Members and all the Officers throughout the great State of Nevada, I humbly ask for your partnership in approving the funding to build a successful peer support program. When you hold your vote, please understand that what you decide on April 11th will impact the lives and families of our officers in the future. I truly hope that you will vote to save the lives of those officers who give their lives to serve you and the public. Thank you for your careful consideration on this monumental decision.

Respectfully,



Paul Lunkwitz

President

FOP

Nevada C.O. Lodge 21

