

# **INTERIM JOINT COMMITTEE ON VETERANS, MILITARY AFFAIRS, AND PUBLIC PROTECTION**

## **Minutes of the 2nd Meeting of the 2021 Interim**

**July 21, 2021**

### **Call to Order and Roll Call**

The 2nd meeting of the Interim Joint Committee on Veterans, Military Affairs, and Public Protection was held on Wednesday, July 21, 2021, at 10:00 AM, in Room 154 of the Capitol Annex. Senator C.B. Embry Jr., Chair, called the meeting to order, and the secretary called the roll.

Present were: Senator C.B. Embry Jr., Co-Chair; Representative Walker Thomas, Co-Chair; Senators Jimmy Higdon, Alice Forgy Kerr, Stephen Meredith, Robby Mills, Dennis Parrett, Brandon Smith, Whitney Westerfield, Mike Wilson, and David Yates; Representatives John Blanton, Kevin D. Bratcher, Myron Dossett, Jim DuPlessis, Chris Fugate, Al Gentry, Robert Goforth, Jim Gooch Jr., Mark Hart, Matthew Koch, Scott Lewis, Savannah Maddox, Bobby McCool, Patti Minter, Scott Sharp, Pamela Stevenson, Ashley Tackett Laferty, Bill Wesley, and Buddy Wheatley.

Members: Senator C.B. Embry Jr., Co-Chair; Representative Walker Thomas, Co-Chair; Senators Jimmy Higdon, Alice Forgy Kerr, Stephen Meredith, Robby Mills, Dennis Parrett, Wil Schroder, Brandon Smith, Whitney Westerfield, Mike Wilson, and David Yates; Representatives John Blanton, Kevin D. Bratcher, Myron Dossett, Jim DuPlessis, Chris Freeland, Chris Fugate, Al Gentry, Robert Goforth, Jim Gooch Jr., Mark Hart, Matthew Koch, Scott Lewis, Savannah Maddox, Bobby McCool, Patti Minter, Scott Sharp, Pamela Stevenson, Ashley Tackett Laferty, Bill Wesley, and Buddy Wheatley.

Guests: Kambri Bivins

LRC Staff: Jessica Zeh, Andrew Salman, and Maurya Allen

### **Representative Prunty and Kambri Bivins**

Representative Prunty introduced her guest, Kambri Bivins. Ms. Bivins came to talk about losing her father, Army Specialist Eric Bivins, to post-traumatic stress disorder. She advocated that Kentucky adopt the Honor and Remember Flag.

### **Kentucky Board of Emergency Medical Services**

Michael Poynter, Executive Director of the Kentucky Board of Emergency Medical Services, testified about the struggles that EMS providers faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. He cited labor shortages from sick and quarantined employees, lowered call

volume leading to loss of revenue, increased costs of personal protective equipment, and inadequate reimbursement from insurance companies.

In April 2020, Governor Beshear gave the Board emergency authority to reinstate any EMS provider that had ever been licensed in Kentucky at no cost. As a result, the Board reinstated 1,012 providers. At the beginning of the pandemic, statewide EMS call volume decreased by about 3,000 calls per month. In 2021, these numbers have started to return to their pre-pandemic volume. Less than half of EMS agencies in the state are receiving federal government support—either from CARES money or elsewhere—despite over half applying. Finally, high levels of stress and burnout are increasing turnover.

Engagement is up as a result of the pandemic. EMS agencies have started reaching out more to local health departments and public health organizations to organize efforts and to provide mutual support.

Mr. Poynter stated that to improve EMS providers' financial situations, the federal government should provide reimbursements for treatment-in-place, transportation to alternate locations, facilitation of telemedicine, and community paramedicine.

In response to a question from Senator Meredith, Mr. Poynter testified that EMS providers are being trained in more preventative care and community medicine, and that pilot programs for these services are achieving promising results.

### **Kentucky Firefighter Association**

John Beatsch, President of the Kentucky Firefighter Association, testified that due to the pandemic, every fire call became potentially life-threatening. This increased the strain on the Commonwealth's fire services, as many volunteer firefighters left their departments over fear of being exposed to COVID-19 and having to take leave from their regular jobs. Increased stress also led to PTSD and suicide in some fire fighters. Fire departments also faced significant financial hurdles over the pandemic. Training and custom equipment are most fire departments' largest expenses, so increased turnover also increased costs. At the same time, most volunteer fire departments raise money through community fundraisers, which could not be held out of public safety concerns. CARES money was rarely allocated to fire departments.

Eric Philpot, Vice President of the Kentucky Firefighter Association, stated that all of Mr. Beatsch's testimony regarding volunteer fire departments also applied to professional fire departments. Mr. Philpot added that fire departments had to stop most of their public education and fire prevention programs, such as checking community members' smoke detectors.

In response to a question from Representative Wesley, Mr. Beatsch testified that Kentucky has about 800 fire departments, of which 20% are professional and 80% are volunteer.

In response to a question from Senator Westerfield, Mr. Beatsch testified that calls for service were down between 10-20% in 2020, and are up about 15% in 2021.

In response to a question from Senator Meredith, Mr. Beatsch testified that in order to improve volunteer firefighter retention, the training and continuing education requirements need to be reduced and budgets for recruitment need to be increased.

In response to a question from Representative Tackett-Laferty, Mr. Beatsch testified that there is no current financial benefit to being a volunteer fire fighter, and that solutions like tax credits would be appreciated.

In response to a question from Representative Blanton, Mr. Beatsch stated that while he did not believe most fire departments would be opposed to hiring felons, state regulations currently prohibit fire departments from employing felons or accepting them as volunteer fire fighters.

### **Kentucky State Police**

Colonel Phillip Burnett, Jr., Commissioner of the Kentucky State Police, testified that the work of police and support staff could not be done remotely, and so almost every KSP employee had to work in person during the pandemic. In-person work created anxiety for KSP employees that they would get sick, or transmit the virus to their families or coworkers.

During the pandemic, KSP provided additional security presence at regional hospitals, traffic control at testing sites, surveillance for closed businesses, and security for vaccine transportation.

KSP is facing historic lows in state trooper enrollment. During the pandemic, the Trooper Academy was able to graduate 45 troopers while in compliance with CDC guidelines.

Col. Burnett testified that significant pay raises are needed to make KSP salary competitive with local police departments. Fixing KSP's retention issues is one of Col. Burnett's priorities currently.

In response to a question from Chairman Embry, Col. Burnett testified that KSP had 1,009 troopers in 2006 and only 740 currently. KSP averages 5.8 resignations per month since January 2021.

In response to a question from Representative Blanton, Col. Burnett testified that there has been an increase in reports of all types of violence except for arson.

In response to a question from Representative Sharp, Col. Burnett testified that KSP's current authorized strength is 1,070, they currently have a strength of 740, and of those 740, 150 are eligible to retire as of the next cycle. The next class at the KSP Trooper Academy will have about 90 cadets, hopefully between 60-70 will graduate, but even then those graduates will not be eligible for duty until June 2022.

### **Kentucky Association of Chiefs of Police**

Todd Kelley an Executive Board Member of the Kentucky Association of Chiefs of Police (KACP), testified that police had to overcome significant hurdles to serve the public. He implored the Assembly to adequately equip police officers, as they had to make their own hand sanitizer and masks during the pandemic, and the equipment that police received from state stockpiles was often subpar.

The murder of George Floyd increased scrutiny on police. Social justice is a national debate that is being used to camouflage an attack on police. KACP is working to weed out bad police officers and to reinvent itself in the face of negative perceptions. KACP supported 21RS SB 80, the "decertification" bill, which would prevent terminated police from easily getting hired elsewhere. SB 80 also expands the list of acts constituting professional wrongdoing and creates an automatic decertification process.

Police are ill-equipped to handle homeless people and mentally ill people. Despite this, police spend a disproportionate amount of time responding to calls regarding these people. The solution is to increase funding for programs which facilitate treatment and counseling.

Most routine police interactions are recorded on video currently, and KACP regards cell phone videos of police interactions to be the norm.

In response to a question from Representative Blanton, Mr. Kelley testified that there has been an increase in calls regarding domestic violence, homeless people, and mentally ill people.

In response to a question from Representative Sharp, Mr. Kelley testified that his police department in Ashland, Kentucky, is authorized for 48 officers, currently has 45 officers, and several are currently eligible to retire.

In response to a question from Representative Tackett-Lafferty, Mr. Kelley testified that in order to be admitted to the KSP Training Academy, an individual needs to be employed by a local police department and receive a recommendation from the chief of that department. KSP Training Academy does not accept cadets straight out of high school or college.

### **Kentucky Fraternal Order of Police**

Ryan Straw, the Government Affairs Liaison for the Kentucky Fraternal Order of Police, testified that FOP created a website to share data and instructions regarding COVID-19 protocols to police. Five hundred seven law enforcement deaths have been attributed to COVID-19 nationwide, and six occurred in Kentucky. FOP created a campaign to get police vaccinated. Currently, the number of police testing positive for COVID-19 is trending down. Mr. Straw testified that 901 police officers have been affected by COVID-19 and that 30% of police stations need additional personal protective equipment.

Mr. Straw also testified that virtually all police officers are “good cops” and that conversations regarding social justice and policing need to make space for FOP to participate. FOP is listening to a variety of organizations’ talking points regarding social justice and is trying to find common ground, even with organizations advocating to defund the police.

The public needs additional education on what law enforcement does. FOP acknowledges and recognizes the pain that certain groups have felt because of a few “bad cops.” The negative public image of police is lowering the morale and effectiveness of police.

The next meeting will be Wednesday, August 24, 2021 at 10:00 AM in Room 154. With no further business, the meeting adjourned at 11:45 AM.