



SPEAKING NOTES

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**DEPUTATION TO THE
STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL POLICY**

**BILL 163, Supporting Ontario's First Responders Act
(Posttraumatic Stress Disorder), 2016**

Monday, March 7, 2016

5 p.m.

- Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.
- My name is Jason Brearley
- I'm director of OPSEU's Ambulance Division, representing over 2,000 paramedics and hundreds of dispatchers in Ontario.
- I've been a paramedic for 19 years.
- I currently practise at the advanced-care level.
- I'm proud to be in the company of my fellow first responders to speak on this vitally important issue.
- I would like to begin by thanking the government for introducing this legislation, all three political parties for supporting the bill, and those who have passionately pursued this legislation since 2010.
- The word "PTSD" hasn't been in paramedics' vocabulary for more than about 10 years.
- However, I can assure you that the condition has existed ever since kind people have been voluntarily putting themselves in the presence of tragedy in order to provide care.
- For responders and legislators, one of our challenges in dealing with PTSD is that the triggers are unpredictable.
- A single call for a critically ill child who happens to have the same birthday as your own child, or who shares a physical trait with a niece or nephew, can be enough to provoke a cascade of vulnerability.
- Conversely, a paramedic or dispatcher can feel the building pressure as weeks go by, where once or twice a week, you end up on serious calls.
- Each call wears on you until the stress becomes evident in your everyday life.
- At best, these stressors can ruin a day or a week, which has happened to almost anyone who's done the work long enough.

- But at worst, these stressors can cause deep depression, end relationships and, as we've seen here in Ontario, result in the tragic loss of life.
- This unpredictability challenges us all.
- As co-workers, we have a hard time knowing that an individual we see every day is suffering.
- Because of the stigma around mental health, often those suffering from stress and depression are not forthcoming about their illness.
- Families don't understand what's wrong or what they can do.
- Employers, especially in our lines of work, don't have the day-to-day contact with their employees to be effective in helping identify the condition.
- Further, they also struggle with ignorance around mental health, as evidenced by the fact they are the only group objecting to this legislation.
- This inconsistency extends beyond the care of the individual.
- It presents the leaders of the profession, as well as the governing bodies, with a particularly difficult challenge in managing the problem on a systemic scale.
- That there is a systemic problem is undeniable.
- In Canada, five suicides of paramedics were reported in 2014.
- That number tripled to 15 in 2015.
- In the first two months of 2016 alone, we've had six suicides.
- These alarming statistics are reflected in all the careers considered in this legislation.
- Now, our employers are under pressure to find "efficiencies."
- How taxpayer dollars are spent always warrants examination

- But somehow it always results in paramedics doing more calls with less recovery time.
- Our population is aging – this is no secret in our workplaces.
- In my workplace alone, a study was commissioned that predicts an 80 per cent increase in call volumes.
- Ontario’s ambulance dispatch centres are in a staffing crisis.
- Some larger centres are seeing dispatchers answer and engage in almost double the acceptable amount of 911 calls per person.
- This means they have little to no time to regroup before picking up the next 911 call.
- Further, there is limited training and support for first responders in the area of traumatic or emotional events.
- This guarantees that our systemic problem will only get worse.
- We paramedics are a stoic group.
- As I mentioned earlier, there’s a stigma in our workplace around mental illness that we’re working to overcome.
- I recently saw a meme on social media that showed a paramedic counselling her child.
- “No, son, you have a paramedic for a mother. You won’t be going to the hospital unless you’re dying.”
- Dark humour to be sure, but it illustrates our paradoxical reluctance to seek help.
- Just getting a paramedic or dispatcher to acknowledge they need help and time away from work is difficult.
- Currently, when a paramedic or any first responder identifies that they have PTSD – a stage that many never reach – they are confronted with having to initiate a claim to WSIB.

- This means recounting their struggle and their triggers to their own physician and to someone in their workplace.
- In most cases, the next step is a denial of the claim by WSIB, often supported by letters from the employer encouraging denial.
- This alone is a systemic barrier to getting treatment and a deterrent to asking for help.
- The next steps usually include recounting the triggers to a WSIB adjudicator and to an independent assessment doctor who's not been supportive during the process.
- It's well known in our workplace that this process is difficult.
- I suspect it's why so many of my co-workers don't seek help – until it's too late.
- Further, it's counterproductive to an effective PTSD treatment plan to recount the details of your stressors, since the very act of recounting can be harmful.
- If I have to tell someone for the fifth time how I hurt my back lifting the patient out of the tub, that doesn't make my back injury worse.
- But if I have to recount my story of that traumatic call and the horrific things I've witnessed – when it is *those very memories* that show up in my dreams and keep me from sleeping or even functioning – then we're doing further harm.
- In my line of work, we talk about the risk/benefit analysis of any treatment plan.
- That's because we're frequently confronted with unpredictable and inconsistent symptoms.
- In a very short period of time, we're required to consider a treatment plan and decide whether the benefits outweigh the risks of the proposed treatment.
- In considering the solution to PTSD, particularly that part that applies to workplace insurance, the risk is not being fiscally responsible.
- We task the government with spending our tax dollars wisely.

- But we also expect you to look after us in our time of need.
- I would say that, most particularly, we expect you to look after us when that need arises from serving the people of Ontario.
- I and my fellow paramedics understand that, when we are addressing a musculoskeletal injury, some extra assessment before granting time away from work may be warranted.
- However when further assessment is likely to do harm and expose the patient to prolonged suffering, then the benefits of immediate treatment outweigh the risks.
- There's no such thing as perfect legislation, but we all need to sleep at night.
- I implore you to consider how robust presumptive legislation on PTSD for first responders will decrease suffering and save lives.
- It's the right thing to do.
- We can no longer accept the risks of the path we're on.
- I'm convinced that informed taxpayers and legislators would agree.
- My fellow paramedics and I know that the next shift might be the "bad" one – the one that keeps you awake for days or causes you to cry when you get home.
- These are the days that come to mind when someone inevitably asks you in a social situation, "What's the worst thing you've ever seen?"
- I almost never answer that question, and I'm not here to traumatize any of you with these stories.
- Rather, I want you to understand that all of us willingly bear these burdens.
- But when the days get too bad – when the memories start to pile up, when we find ourselves short tempered or depending too much on the next drink – we need help, and we need it before we lose our jobs and our families.

- Before we contemplate ending our own lives.
- The truth is, we need it before the next independent medical exam can be scheduled.
- And please believe me, ladies and gentlemen, if we ask for help, it means it is “that bad.”
- PTSD can be treated, and those suffering from it can return to being productive workers.
- In fact, they can even become better paramedics and dispatchers.
- But that treatment needs to be well timed, and it needs to be accessible – without creating further suffering.
- I implore you: use your power to remove the systemic barriers.
- Allow those who suffer from PTSD to seek help and remove themselves quickly – before they do that last call that puts them beyond help.
- Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. I would be happy to take any questions.