

Testimony of Les Neri, President, Fraternal Order of Police, PA State Lodge
Before Pennsylvania House Judiciary Committee, September 15, 2020

Police Training and Department Accreditation

Good morning. My name is Les Neri. I am proud to serve as the elected President of the Fraternal Order of Police, Pennsylvania State Lodge, which represents approximately 40,000 active and retired law enforcement officers and their families throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

I began my career in law enforcement in 1975 and served as a Police Officer and Detective for more than 26 years with the Tredyffrin Township Police Department in Chester County. I am also proud to serve as Second Vice President for the National Fraternal Order of Police, which represents over 350,000 officers and their families across our great nation.

On behalf of the members of the Fraternal Order of Police and their families, and this year more than any other in my lifetime, I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to the many members of this Committee who have consistently and unwaveringly supported Pennsylvania's law enforcement officers - Thank you.

My comments today will be focused on the critically important issues of law enforcement training and accreditation, with an emphasis on training.

In my 40 years in the field, I have never witnessed a more difficult or more dangerous time to be a law enforcement officer. Law enforcement officers are placed in impossible situations on a daily basis, where we're required to make split-second decisions that have life-and-death consequences. As we have seen this summer, the fallout can reach far beyond the individual officer and the specific offender. In 2020, like it or not, American law enforcement officers have been placed in a truly impossible position.

How exactly do we prepare our sons and daughters to make the right decisions as law enforcement officers in these impossible situations?

The answer is simple. We train them. Then we train them again. Then again. Then again. We use our knowledge and experience to develop the best policing standards for our communities, which will protect both the law enforcement officers and the citizens they encounter. We constantly review and revise those standards as we continue to learn and grow. ~~And~~ Then we train, and train, and train some more.

There is no easy way to skip this necessary ingredient to safer policing. The truth is that if we are really serious about changing our police departments, then we will need to

significantly increase our financial investment into our police departments so that they have the time and resources to train and retrain our officers. You can't do that by "defunding" anything. It takes investment.

I have heard some critics over the past few months say that training isn't enough. That we need to do "more" to improve policing, even here in Pennsylvania, where we have some of the best law enforcement officers in the world and the numbers to prove it. When I hear someone say, "training isn't enough," my response is "there isn't enough training", and it's true. There isn't enough training. Not even close. We agree that there are many other things we can also do to continue to improve our police departments, the criminal justice system, and the communities in which our officers' risk their lives each day, but it all starts with training.

As the Committee will hear today, Pennsylvania already has robust mandatory, continuing training and education standards for our state and municipal law enforcement officers. Officer certification is predicated on officers securing and maintaining basic training and education standards. To this end, through MPOETC and other local endeavors, Pennsylvania already stands as a national leader on the issue of training.

We should be doing more. Here's an example. Just a few months ago, in May, the Pennsylvania FOP sponsored a two-day Realistic De-escalation Instructor training seminar in Pittsburgh. The training, the first of its kind in our Commonwealth, was intended to be the first in a series of FOP-sponsored training seminars to teach officers the skills necessary to accurately assess and diffuse potentially violent confrontations, and to teach them how to instruct their fellow officers on these standards. The goal was to help our officers help themselves to make better decisions and secure safer outcomes for everyone. Unfortunately, due to COVID, that training was cancelled.

The PA FOP was proud to lead the way on de-escalation training, but why did we have to develop, fund and market our own training? Because we want the safest possible outcome in use of force situations for all parties involved.

My hope is that hearings like this will lead to greater investment in training so that every law enforcement officer in the Commonwealth can have the opportunity to attend de-escalation and similar training and, in the process, become better officers for their communities. I urge the Committee to work with stakeholders to develop ways to increase and improve training and education opportunities for Pennsylvania's law enforcement officers so we can achieve this goal.

On a similar note, I would like to strongly encourage the members of the House Judiciary Committee to personally attend the use of force and de-escalation options training that our

officers receive. This training uses real-life scenarios to demonstrate how quickly officers are required to make life-or-death decisions in the field. I believe this will not only give you a better sense of what law enforcement officers are experiencing on the streets, but also greatly assist you with future legislative decisions concerning public safety.

In closing, let me state that the PA FOP has been, and will continue to be, at the forefront of efforts to improve Pennsylvania's law enforcement system. We support efforts to fund and to enhance professional training and standards while improving the safety of our communities, and upholding equity and justice for all. We look forward to continuing to partner with other stakeholders in legislative efforts to provide the best public safety services possible to Pennsylvania's citizens.

Thank you for your continued support for the men and women in Pennsylvania's law enforcement community.