



# CITY OF HOUSTON

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April 14, 2025

The Honorable Gary VanDeaver –Committee Chair  
House Committee on Public Health

RE: House Bill 35

Honorable Chairman VanDeaver and Members of the House Committee on Public Health,

On behalf of the City of Houston, I appreciate the opportunity to provide and share this written testimony in support of the House Committee Substitute of House Bill 25 (CSHB 35). As the Health and Safety Chief for Houston Fire Department, I support CSHB 35, which would peer support resources for firefighters and emergency medical services (EMS) personnel. Peer support for law enforcement has been codified into statute since the 87th Legislature in 2021. The needs for firefighters and EMS personnel should not be ignored. In addition, programs should be oriented to their needs as our former staff psychologist Dr. Sam Buser notes that their experiences from the general population and law enforcement are distinct.

The frequency of exposure to traumatic scenes for firefighters may be even higher than law enforcement as firefighters encounter industrial accidents, heart attacks, vehicular injuries, fires, and suicides. These cumulative events across many years of a career have an impact. A 2022 study suggests that the rate of PTSD for firefighters may be as high as 57 percent. likelihood of developing PTSD increases with repeated exposure to traumatic events. Thus, firefighters have a higher rate of PTSD than combat veterans, because of the long-term exposure to such events. Even at this low rate, more firefighter deaths occur from suicide than on the emergency scene. The Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance reports that the number of firefighter suicides annually exceeds the number of fatalities on a fire scene despite the acknowledgment that the number of suicides is understood to be underreported at only 40%.

Although peer support programs addressing mental health needs for other first responders are available through Department of State Health Services and TEEX, such programs have not been made official with legislative action. Other state legislatures, including Illinois, Nebraska, Virginia, and Florida, have already established peer support training programs that serve the full spectrum of first responders including firefighters and EMS personnel. Behavioral Health Training seeks to, increase awareness of signs and symptoms of behavioral health concerns, promote psychoeducation on the issue of behavioral health, and provide early identification efforts and intervention resources.

Houston Fire Department has in-house programs in place, and the committee substitute would not affect our current initiatives but would provide additional avenues for resources for us and for the rest of the state's fire and EMS services.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael Marino".

Michael Marino  
Health and Safety Chief, Houston Fire Department