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SEN. JACQUE COLUMN: EXTEND MENTAL HEALTH PROTECTIONS TO ALL PUBLIC SAFETY EMPLOYEES

Proposal extends PTSD coverage under worker's compensation to all first responders

MADISON ... There are countless reminders in our society of our need for protectors- the ones who willingly put themselves in harm's way and answer the call when lives are on the line. Whether on our daily commute or elsewhere about the community, or even just through a news broadcast, we are bombarded almost daily with situations none of us would EVER want to face with our friends and families, times where we take a moment and say a silent prayer for those affected, including our first responders. This Spring, several members of my immediate and extended family were injured by a reckless driver who hit them from behind. The responding officer said it was the worst crash he'd ever seen. Thank God, everyone has recovered. But when my wife and I came to the scene, we were a wreck emotionally. And I thank God that there are those still willing to bring incredible skill and care whenever called upon in the worst of circumstances.

Last session, the Wisconsin Legislature enacted [2021 Act 29](#) with overwhelming bi-partisan support to remove the "greater dimensions" test from being utilized to effectively block Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) recovery support for law enforcement and full-time firefighters. Essentially, these brave men and women were being punished based on the traumatic and harrowing nature of what they see and hear every day on the job protecting our communities. This legislation was a critical step toward eliminating the basic injustice of the greater dimensions test and continuing the work I began years ago in authoring legislation to ensure this essential treatment is available to all first responders.

It made no sense for state workers compensation law to essentially castigate someone for choosing an occupation where they must routinely rush toward, rather than away from, danger.

I was deeply honored this summer to be named State Legislator of the Year by the Wisconsin State Fire Chiefs Association (WSFCA) for supporting those who are always there to risk their lives for us in emergency situations. Those who put their lives on the line to protect us are true heroes, and they deserve all the support we can give them.

But now that this avenue for treatment is open to some of our first responders, more work needs to be done to fairly address the needs of all first responders and workers within the law enforcement community. Extending PTSD coverage in Wisconsin has already seen utilization without significant financial impact, and is expected to aid significantly in improved workforce retention and mental resiliency.

That's why my colleagues and I re-introduced legislation ([Senate Bill 113](#)) to expand Act 29 to make PTSD coverage also available to our emergency medical service practitioners, dispatchers, corrections officers, medical examiners, coroners and volunteer firefighters, as many other states have already done.

Last session, this legislation ([2021 SB 681](#)) passed both the Senate Labor and Regulatory Reform Committee (5-0) and the full State Senate (32-0) unanimously. I, along with numerous first responders, also formally presented this proposal to the Worker's Compensation Advisory Council last year, which voted earlier this month to include provisions of the bill that extend coverage for volunteer

firefighters and all EMS within one of their negotiated bills between labor and management- a very positive step toward covering all the vital professions within Senate Bill 113.

There is a growing post-traumatic stress crisis among our first responder community that has continued to escalate. We are now losing more members of law enforcement and other first responders to suicide than in-the-line-of duty deaths.

I particularly think about the impact of these tragic events on our volunteer fire firefighters, who are the backbone of our local communities. When they respond to an emergency, there is a good chance they may know the victim in the car accident, or the family whose house burned down. These are their friends and neighbors. Such incidents - always heartbreaking - may hit our volunteer first responders even harder, because they are personal.

Fortunately, we know PTSD can be treated effectively, and allow these heroic men and women to return to protecting and serving the public. It is critical that those we have depended on as first responders who are affected by PTSD have access to treatment and the support they need to recover, both for their own health and the benefit of the communities they serve.

Senator André Jacque represents Northeast Wisconsin's First Senate District, consisting of Door and Kewaunee Counties and portions of Brown, Calumet, Manitowoc, and Outagamie counties.