

LB196 Bolton Testimony

Good afternoon Chairman McDonnell and members of the Retirement Committee, my name is Lucas Bolton (L-U-C-A-S B-O-L-T-O-N) I am the appointed legislative representative of the State Troopers Association of Nebraska and I am here today to testify in support of LB 196. I am currently employed as a Criminal investigator for the Nebraska State Patrol, and have been employed with the agency for over seven years. In my time with the patrol I have held several roles. I have been a TAC Officer for 5 consecutive recruit academy camps. A TAC Officer's role is to teach, prepare, and socialize new recruits as they become Troopers throughout the academy process. I performed that role, up until I became a polygraph examiner, at which time I began conducting the pre-employment polygraphs that the recruit candidates would undergo before receiving a final offer of employment from the agency. While performing these roles I have gained a unique perspective on both the quantity and quality of candidates we see coming through the onboarding process. These positions have provided me with a plethora of opportunities to have conversations with people about why they want to join the State Patrol. **Through those conversations I have also learned that many qualified candidates apply with other agencies while going through our hiring process. We are competing with these other agencies for the most qualified candidates.**

LB 196 brings forth three important changes which will aide the Patrol with recruitment, retention, and ensure the continued quality of Law Enforcement in the State of Nebraska.

First, and the change that I will speak most in depth on, is the reduction in the contribution that each Trooper makes to the State Patrol Retirement Fund. I believe that this change will have a profound impact on future recruitment of State Troopers, but also equally important, the retention of our current sworn officers.

The Patrol has an authorized force of 482 sworn officers. The agency is currently sitting with more than 60 vacancies. Over the last several years, the number of vacancies has been steadily growing. One of the issues in attracting potential new recruits **was** compensation. Governor Pillen has shown his support for the Patrol,

by helping to make the Nebraska State Patrol compensation competitive with other in-state agencies. While the compensation is now more competitive, one thing that is not, is the contribution rates the Troopers make into the State Patrol Retirement Fund.

Currently each Trooper contributes either 16% or 17% of their monthly compensation into the retirement fund. The Lincoln police department's officers contribute 8% for their defined benefit pension plan. The Omaha Police department's officers contribute 16.1%, for their pension, however, they also receive full post-employment healthcare. OPD's plan is described as 8% for the pension and 8% for the post-employment healthcare. The State Patrol does not receive post-employment healthcare despite contributing as much or more than OPD. Taking this into account, when comparing the State Patrol with OPD and LPD's retirement contributions, the Patrol contributes twice as much for a similar retirement benefit.

I believe the retirement board has previously been provided a chart of the contributions rates of other state law enforcement agencies used for comparison by the Commission on Industrial Relations. In that data you can see that the Nebraska State Patrol has the highest retirement contribution rates, with the average amongst comparable agencies at 7%.

LB 196 would reduce the contribution that each officer of the Nebraska State Patrol makes to the State Patrol Retirement Fund to 8%. If passed, this would immediately make the Patrol comparable to other in-state agencies and in line with the average of comparable state agencies. This would aid in recruitment as the Patrol would be able to offer a more competitive compensation package and increase the take-home pay of new Troopers.

In addition to the benefits to recruitment, the reduced contribution would also significantly benefit retention. A common concern that I have heard from my colleagues is the current contribution rates of 16 and 17 percent.

When I was a new troop, I bought a modest home, had a used vehicle, and I barely broke even with my take home pay every month. I had a constant worry that I was

one catastrophic event, (like severe car problems or the hvac going out), away from being in a serious financial hole. Over the years I found out this was a common feeling among my colleagues.

I have consistently heard some of my fellow State Troopers contemplate leaving the State Patrol and joining a different agency not because the overall pay was drastically better, but because the retirement contribution rates were significantly lower, and they would be able to take home more of the pay that they earned to support their families.

One way that Troopers offset this financial need is by working off duty jobs. Many Troopers work their regular shifts and then pick up extra hours working off duty to ensure financial security. This takes them away from their families, that they are working so hard to support.

The job of being a Trooper is incredibly stressful. I'm not asking for you to be sympathetic to the stress that comes from this line of work. Every current Nebraska State Trooper knew they were signing up for that when they took the job. What I am asking is for you to help alleviate some of the financial stresses that currently come as a side effect while working this job.

Looking across the board at both brand new Troopers and 20+ year vets, the proposed reduction in retirement contribution to 8% will allow Troopers to take home around an extra \$500 or more of their earnings

That monthly increase would have a significant impact on both providing financial security and relieving financial stress. This will aid in retaining our current sworn staff, and stop the loss of experienced officers that the state has already placed a considerable investment of time and resources recruiting and training.

The second change that LB 196 proposes, is changing the benefit received by surviving spouses of officers of the Nebraska State Patrol from seventy-five percent to one hundred percent of the amount of that officer's retirement annuity.

I know being a Nebraska State Trooper can be a very hectic lifestyle. From working nights and weekends, to getting randomly called out for service at the most random and inopportune times. During a Troopers career their spouse is a truly integral part for them to be successful and perform their duties. Many times a spouse has to operate alone in managing the household and fulfilling parental duties while we are out providing a service to the public. Without this sacrifice and commitment from the spouses, I believe it would be almost impossible for a Trooper to have any kind of normal family life. I truly believe that most of the time the spouses work just as hard, to be able to make a Trooper successful in fulfilling his duties to the state. It would bring me great relief to know that after my death my wife would be just as taken care of, and not face any additional financial stresses on top of the loss of me. Changing the benefit from 75% to 100% for the surviving spouses, would be a great benefit for every Trooper.

The Third and last change Proposed in LB196, amending that the benefit paid to a retired annuity shall be increased annually by either the percentage change in the Consumer Price Index or one percent/two and one half percent, whichever is greater. The current statute reads whichever is lesser. This has been particularly notable these last three years when the CPI has been unusually high. The current statute simply does not account for rapidly increasing inflation over multiple years and has left the Patrol's retirement benefits sorely behind the level of inflation. By making this small amendment to the COLA to be the greater, it will combat the ever increasing cost of living and ensure that Troopers maintain financial security throughout their retirement.

All three of the changes proposed in LB 196 will have a significant impact in combating the current issues of recruitment and retention faced by the Nebraska State Patrol. I want to thank Senator Eliot Bostar for recognizing these issues and proposing such impactful legislation to directly address them. This legislation will help to maintain the law enforcement manpower provided by the Nebraska State Patrol ensuring a safe and secure Nebraska.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.