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Ohio State Highway Patrol
Testimony of Colonel Charles Jones
Operating Budget Bill
House Public Safety Committee
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Chair Abrams, Vice Chair Miller, Ranking Member Thomas and Members of the House Public Safety Committee: I am Colonel Charles Jones, superintendent of the Ohio State Highway Patrol. It is an honor to appear before you today to testify on behalf of the Division.

At the Patrol, our commitment to protecting Ohioans is unwavering. Our work extends far beyond the state's roadways – we assist local law enforcement agencies, building strong collaborations to enhance public safety. To illustrate the effectiveness of these partnerships, I want to share a few examples of the significant impact our troopers have made.

In 2024, the Patrol collaborated with multiple law enforcement agencies and organizations to carry out more than 60 targeted law enforcement efforts and special operations in urban and rural areas.

Collaborations in cities such as Cleveland aimed to reduce violent crime and restore a sense of safety within its neighborhoods. We worked alongside the Cleveland Division of Police, Ohio Investigative Unit and other area law enforcement agencies. From 2023 to 2024, I am proud to say that Ohio state troopers made more than 300 felony arrests, seized nearly 150 illegal firearms and recovered more than 120 stolen vehicles.

And, when concerned city officials in East Cleveland reached out to us for support, we responded. The Patrol provided assistance with traffic crash investigations and increased visibility.

Our efforts in Youngstown have also made a meaningful impact on reducing violent crime. The Patrol provided critical resources such as air support, intelligence sharing and an increased presence on the roads. In the past year alone, the Patrol helped remove more than 100 illegal firearms from the streets, directly contributing to a decline in violent crime, including homicides.

Whether troopers are removing dangerous criminals from Ohio roadways, responding to a tornado at Indian Lake or responding to demonstrations at The Ohio State University, our impact is not limited to metropolitan areas.

On September 2, 2023, Bowling Green Post troopers along with deputies from the Wood County Sheriff's Office located a vehicle and suspects wanted in connection with a carjacking and homicide that occurred earlier in the day in Michigan. During the subsequent pursuit, the suspects shot at the pursuing officers multiple times – eventually coming to an end in Hancock County, where troopers engaged in gunfire and a standoff began. The situation ended with the passenger and driver being safely taken into custody.

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The next day, Findlay Post troopers located a vehicle in Hancock County that was believed to be driven by a murder suspect involved in a shooting in Chicago. Troopers attempted to stop the vehicle without success. Following a pursuit, intentional contact was made, and the vehicle came to rest and caught on fire in the median of Interstate 75. The driver exited the vehicle with a handgun and began walking toward motorists stopped in traffic. Troopers fired shots due to the imminent threat to officers and bystanders, with the suspect later succumbing to his injuries.

At the Ohio State Highway Patrol, we take our mission to protect and serve seriously, putting our lives on the line every day to ensure our state remains safe. Beyond immediate dangers, our impact extends across Ohio, including in Brown County, where our Criminal Patrol Unit partnered with the Brown County Sheriff's Office and the Brown County Quick Response Team for a service initiative. During this operation, we removed dangerous drugs from circulation, took impaired drivers off the road and connected individuals with treatment resources. These proactive efforts are more than enforcement – they are about saving lives.

A key way we are working with local law enforcement partners to keep communities safe is through our Aviation Section. These resources are invaluable in both law enforcement operations and lifesaving search missions.

In 2024, the Aviation Section responded to more than 1,000 mission requests, with nearly 70 percent of those coming from outside agencies. As part of these efforts, we successfully located more than 300 individuals, including dangerous criminals and missing people.

One of those missing individuals was a 65-year-old man from Fairfield County with dementia and diabetes. After an exhaustive search, our Aviation Section located him standing on ice in a creek. As ground units approached, he fell through the ice, but thanks to swift coordination from above, first responders rescued him in time. Without our aerial support, his family might be telling a very different story today.

Additionally, our Downlink system offers command staff – along with local, state and federal agencies – a broader view of a scene or search area. This real-time aerial intelligence, provided at no cost, enhances situational awareness and supports more strategic decision-making. Since its deployment, the system has helped track fleeing suspects in over 160 vehicle pursuits, and contributed to the recovery of 78 stolen vehicles and 75 illegal firearms.

Criminal patrol is part of our core mission – and our troopers use every stop as an opportunity to make a difference. Over the past two years, troopers have interdicted more than 21,000 pounds of marijuana, more than 1,300 pounds of cocaine, nearly 900 pounds of methamphetamine and more than 200 pounds of fentanyl – preventing these dangerous drugs from potentially reaching our children. Troopers also seized more than 42,000 dosage units of opiate pills.

Several of our illegal drug seizures last year were among the largest in the Patrol's history. I want to share one of those significant seizures.

Last August, a trooper stopped a commercial vehicle on Interstate 70 for a speed violation. A Patrol drug-detecting canine alerted to the vehicle, and a probable cause search revealed nearly 300 pounds of methamphetamine in cardboard boxes in the trailer. This stop is the second largest methamphetamine seizure in our history.

Beyond drugs and illegal weapons, troopers are also trained to recognize the signs of human trafficking – a crime that devastates families and often goes unnoticed in plain sight. Even during daily patrols, our troopers remain vigilant, understanding that a single traffic stop could mean the difference between freedom and the continued exploitation of a victim.

An example occurred in August 2024, when troopers from the Hamilton Post first encountered a commercial vehicle driver, whose suspicious behavior with regard to a 16-year-old juvenile passenger, prompted a deeper investigation. Upon examining the driver's cell phone, troopers discovered an intimate photo of him and the juvenile which was counter to the father-daughter relationship he had previously stated. During our investigation, digital evidence revealed that child sexual abuse material had been exchanged between their devices.

The case escalated when the juvenile ran away from home within days of being returned. A day later, the man from the original Hamilton Post contact, now wanted for his role in the crime, was found in a hotel parking lot in Montgomery County with the runaway in a stolen vehicle. The juvenile was recovered safely, but the driver fled, leading to a high-speed chase that ended when he crashed into a train.

During the investigation, our investigators examined three devices seized from the scene. One of the devices contained a hidden folder with multiple videos and images of child sexual abuse material. The investigation also uncovered videos showing the driver staging the camera to record six other underage victims.

Being a law enforcement officer demands intuition, vigilance and the ability to recognize when something isn't right. Our troopers didn't just see what was in front of them, they followed the leads, asked the right questions and trusted their instincts – and training – to uncover the truth.

Recognizing the critical role of our troopers in combating human trafficking, the Patrol prioritized specialized training by partnering with the Human Trafficking Training Center. We hosted courses to equip troopers and local law enforcement with the skills to identify trafficking indicators and effectively conduct operations, ensuring they are prepared to identify and protect vulnerable individuals who may not be able to speak for themselves.

The work we do on our roadways is equally critical for every individual who travels throughout Ohio. Thanks to the support of the General Assembly, the implementation of Ohio's primary hands-free law in April 2023 has resulted in significant improvements in traffic safety. According to Cambridge Mobile Telematics, in the first year of the law's implementation, handheld phone use and screen interaction while driving decreased 10% across the state.

This reduction is remarkable, given that many states see an initial reduction in phone use while driving following the implementation of a hands-free law, then a regression in driver behavior. Ohio was the only state in the country to see early reductions and increase them more than one year after passing a hands-free law and starting enforcement.

A true testament to the power of sustained effort, these results are the direct outcome of collaboration with the Ohio Department of Transportation, Ohio Department of Public Safety and motorists of Ohio.

We are also leading a new oral fluid test program to combat impaired driving. This pilot program, which launched in 2024, provides an efficient, non-invasive method for testing drivers suspected of being under the influence of drugs.

By working with state partners and supportive legislators to create parameters for testing, validating results and collection procedures, this initiative further demonstrates the Patrol's commitment to safety by ensuring that impaired drivers do not endanger those who live and work in our great state. Over the past five years, alcohol-related traffic fatalities have accounted for more than half of all traffic deaths, while drug-related fatalities have made up nearly 40 percent. The urgency of this program is clear – every life lost is one too many.

Recognizing the importance of commercial vehicle and school bus safety, the Patrol's Licensing and Commercial Standards Section took decisive action in 2024 to reduce driver errors and ensure safer travel for all. Troopers and motor carrier enforcement inspectors conducted nearly 88,000 commercial stops – identifying serious violations, including more than 1,600 commercial driver license issues and more than 21,000 out-of-service orders. These types of violations pose significant risks to safety.

Another important aspect of our work is keeping Ohio's children safe, including the many students whose primary means of transportation is a school bus, which is recognized as the safest mode of transportation for children according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

The Patrol inspects more than 23,000 school buses each year, conducting inspections twice a year to ensure compliance with safety regulations. Any bus that fails to meet the standards is immediately taken out of service, eliminating potential risks before they reach the road. This unwavering commitment to safety isn't just about compliance, it's about safeguarding the lives of Ohio's students, giving parents the confidence that their children are safely transported to and from school, and school-related events.

Through proactive measures such as an emphasis on distracted driving, focused drug and alcohol impaired driving enforcement, increased traffic stops and commercial vehicle inspections – provisionally – 86 fewer lives were lost on Ohio roadways in 2024 than in 2023, marking Ohio's third consecutive year of declining traffic fatalities.

That is 86 more people who made it home. Eighty-six people who will celebrate milestones and share moments with family, all because of the power of visibility and proactive measures.

These collaborations and efforts would not be possible without the dedicated women and men who serve within the Ohio State Highway Patrol.

In closing, our troopers remain steadfast in their commitment to public safety, providing critical support to local law enforcement agencies across Ohio – and even across the nation. Whether responding to emergencies, assisting with large-scale security operations or ensuring the safety of major events, their dedication never wavers.

Chair Abrams, Vice Chair Miller, Ranking Member Thomas and Members of the House Public Safety Committee, I again thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Ohio State Highway Patrol. As you undertake the important work of considering our budget, I know that together we have even greater opportunities to make Ohio safer in the next biennium.