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April 5, 2013

Testimony of Joseph Kennedy, President of Stamford Police Association on H.B. 6674

Good Morning. On behalf of all of the members of the Stamford Police Department and our fellow officers across the state, I want to thank all of you for your efforts to protect Connecticut's police officers and provide us with the tools to protect citizens in the most secure manner as possible.

Raised H.B. No. 6674, relates to when an officer is engaged in the pursuit of a crime suspect. This critical piece of legislation would close a loophole in Connecticut's current law, which inadvertently protects criminals and crime suspects, at the detriment of both law enforcement officers and the citizens we are sworn to protect.

It was only a few short months ago that we learned about this legal loophole. Legislative action is required right away.

In May 2012 a Stamford Police Officer, Troy Strauser was nearly killed in pursuit of a fleeing suspect when he fell 20 feet onto Interstate 95. The suspect was being chased because his vehicle fit the description of one involved in a Stamford robbery that same day. The Stamford officer signaled to the suspect to stop, but instead the car fled onto I-95 beginning a chase from the city of Stamford to Norwalk. Only after spike strips slowed the fleeing car and causing it to crash at exit 14 did the suspect take off on foot after exiting the interstate. Trying to apprehend the suspect on foot Officer Strauser fell off a 20-foot-tall bridge embankment onto the Interstate as the suspect cut across six lanes of the highway on foot to evade law enforcement questioning.

Officer Strauser was critically wounded, suffering from severe head and internal injuries. He spent the next week in surgery and at certain points was not expected to pull through. Titanium was used to reconstruct his arm, his nose was rebuilt and he was unable to eat normally for many months. He continues rehabilitation and therapy and will most likely require many more painful and costly surgeries in the years to come. That day, Officer Stauser was handed a life sentence by the fleeing suspect.

In February 2013 the suspect, who willfully initiated the police chase and refused to stop, and had prior felony convictions, was on parole and driving without a license, pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor and was sentenced to time served. He received three years of probation and 300 hours of community service.

In the case the prosecutor recognized that the laws of our state are unprepared to take such instances of reckless endangerment of police officers and innocent citizens' lives into account, in current law and sentencing guidelines. This needs to be addressed. If Officer Strauser had died that night chasing the suspect into the woods, the only charge the suspect would have faced was interfering with a police officer.

This legislation would now make it a criminal offense for an individual who fails to stop upon being ordered to do so by an officer in pursuit. This legislation is needed because the laws currently do not cover officers who are injured while chasing someone.

Thank you for your consideration and efforts to protect law enforcement.