

Good morning Chairman Hernandez and members of the appropriation committee. My name is Yvonne Sawyers-Swanson. I am the widow of Mark Sawyers, who was a police officer in Sterling Heights and died in the line of duty on June 5, 2004. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to tell you my story and why House bill 4426, the Police and Fire Survivors Tuition Grant is so important to me.

Mark began his law enforcement career in Detroit, serving and protecting there for 3 years. When our daughter was just a few months old, he was hired by Sterling Heights. About that time, we were at home and watching the televised funeral of Detroit officers Jennifer Fettig and Matthew Bowens. We had the talk that every police family dreads but eventually has about the "what-ifs" that every spouse of a responder faces. A short 7 months later, he was taken from me and our baby girl.

Mark and every other police officer know the risks and danger they face when they swear to uphold the law and protect us, and valiantly wear the badge. Mark, and his brothers and sisters in blue, do this unconditionally as they serve our great state of Michigan. Officers put on the uniform with hope of making it home to their loved ones, but take solace in the knowledge that their family will be taken care of in the face of tragedy.

On June 4th, 2004, I was home as Mark was working the afternoon shift, and our daughter Lily who was 11 months old, was with her grandparents when, at 10:30 at night, I heard the loud knocking of two uniformed officers at my front door. Mark had been involved in an incident and I needed to come to the hospital, they said. A doctor pulled me into a room to tell me that Mark had been shot, they did everything that they could, but that Mark was brain dead. "So, you're telling me that there's no hope?" I said. With tears in his eyes he said no.

I begged God for a miracle. I begged Him to take me instead. Mark was hooked up to so many machines, I had trouble getting to him to hold his hand. I saw the extent of the damage. He was still bleeding, and my pants and shoes were covered in blood. As life support was removed, I held Mark's hand as I watched and heard his heart beat for the very last time.

I was afraid of facing the future without him. But knew I had to live on for our daughter. I went home to our baby girl, picked our Lily up, hugging her and

kissing. I knew I would do whatever I had to do to work through this trauma and grief for her. I wanted Lily to grow into the strong and healthy woman Mark and I had always imagined.

Overcoming that trauma became more difficult when I learned the next day that Mark was not just killed in the line of duty but was murdered for no other reason than being a police officer. A man drove up next to Mark's passenger window of his cruiser as he finished an accident report, raised a shotgun, and cold bloodedly murdered my husband.

As a baby, I told Lily her dad was in heaven in hopes of helping her understand the unimaginable. But by age two she asked questions. She began experiencing night terrors which a child psychologist told me resulted from her working through what happened.

There is no handbook for this. Elementary years went from telling her giving her the basic facts to explaining over and over what happened as she tried to process it. By middle school, as her class talked about current events, break downs occurred when she heard about other officers shot and killed in the line of duty. By high school, she entered therapy to deal with symptoms doctors attribute to PTSD surrounding her father's death. Mark died over 15 years ago but the effects of trauma on children are lifelong. Despite all Lily has had to overcome, she has persevered, excels in her academics, works, and has dreams as big as her father's were for her.

Mark's death was followed by a whirlwind of information and paperwork to process. At that time, I was told that a Michigan law assured Lily's college tuition would be paid. It was stability in the face of uncertainty. I had to work part time to support Lily and was a single mom regaining footing in our new lives.

I met my now husband Matt when Lily was 4. Getting remarried was a healthy step forward in my life, a step that Mark and I discussed in that "what if" conversation. I believed that Lily could only benefit from seeing a healthy relationship and receiving the unconditional love of her stepfather. He has brought laughter and love to our lives and has enriched it in so many ways.

I never thought she would be penalized for my decision to honor Mark's wish for us. Many years after remarrying I learned Lily was ineligible for the Police

and Fire Survivors Tuition grant because of my "change in life." The choices I made didn't erase Lily's loss or lessen its trauma, not does it for any other child . Every child who loses a parent in the line of duty. They face unthinkable hurdles, and amassing college debt should not be another as they have already paid the greatest debt imaginable.

The intent of this law is to provide hope so survivors could move forward in the face of unthinkable loss. Limiting this benefit tells some surviving spouses and children that their loss is "less than" another's; that a widow is only a widow if they and their children are without a spouse and without full-time employment. It is unfair and inappropriate to ask widows and children to sacrifice a new normal when they have sacrificed enough.

Lily lost her father and now she will lose her tuition assistance. We must honor the sacrifice Mark made and that Lily endures along with the sacrifice of all surviving children of fallen first responders. We must answer the uncertainty of a lost loved one with the certainty a father's promise, the promise of a future that he can't share with her, but that his ultimate sacrifice provided for her.

When Lily was born, Mark touched her little hands and feet for the first time and said, "it's amazing that a part of me will live on forever in her."

I ask you today to make Mark's legacy one of the hope and good in the world. I ask you to honor the legacies left by all those fallen first responders in service to the state of Michigan. Honor them by keeping the promise made to their children through an unconditional college tuition grant. First responders, like Mark, live and die by an unconditional, and it is time we repay that debt with unconditionally.

