

My name is Zachary Rojas-Villarreal and this letter will be in regards to House Bill 79. I am currently serving as a patrol officer with the Anchorage Police Department. I have been working for APD for 4 years. I've been trained as a field training officer and in the following weeks, I will be going through courses to be SWAT certified. A little background about myself. I have lived in Alaska for about 7 years now. I joined the Army in 2012 and was stationed at Fort Richardson as a Combat Engineer. While stationed here, I grew to love Alaska. Its community, pro freedom, individualism, and simply just the way of life up here. It's another world compared to Southern California, where I am born and raised. In 2015, my enlistment was coming to an end and it was time to decide what to do next with my life. I was truly realizing my strong attachment to Alaska and couldn't imagine myself going anywhere else. So I decided to leave the Army and make Alaska my "forever home".

While I was out processing of the military, I was going through the hiring process with APD. Joining the military or being a police officer were the only two things I'd ever want to do. The timing couldn't have been more perfect between leaving the Army, starting the academy, and making Alaska my permanent residence. But at the time, I had no idea what retirements consisted of. I was a young, motivated, 25 year old who was about to start his dream job. So at the time all I focused on was becoming a good police officer, learning the job, community, and gaining recognition through my peers as a hard worker. But soon after completing the academy and completing field training, I was noticing a trend. At a fast rate, I saw more and more officers leave the department and state for departments in the lower 48. Whether they were senior officers, junior, detectives, or patrol, it did not matter. I didn't really think to myself "why?" Some would mention it was for their family, money, but most brought up the retirement system. While this was going on, officers who have been with APD 10+ years would bring up the city's troubled past. Record low numbers, low morale, and more and more officers leaving for the lower 48. Still, after hearing these stories, my mind was still on progressing in APD.

Again, I never really gave my retirement a thought because I was so junior and was just trying to learn how to do my job the best I could. It wasn't until just a few months ago that I started really thinking about my future. Another officer, who I went to the academy with, mentioned that he saw a financial adviser. The adviser said that with our current retirement, and with what he was contributing, that he was set to retire at 65. 65 years old! That would be 40 years in law enforcement for us. A goal that in my head, was nearly impossible to reach. We all know the common retirement time from law enforcement is 20-25 years. There's a very good reason for that. The things we see, the people we deal with, the stress on ourselves and family, what the media portrays me as, the risks we take, the liability, it's something that the human body and mind cannot do for that long of period of time.

After hearing that, I immediately started looking into my retirement, finances, and what I was contributing. Something I never looked into. I didn't even know where to look. I had our payroll department assist me by giving me the links and info on how to check my accounts. I then learned about pensions, better retirement programs, and Alaska's old retirement system. New articles about APD's record low staffing, officers leaving, things that I've been hearing senior officers say all these years. The following week, my wife and I spoke to a financial expert with Edwards Jones. My wife and I told him our professions (my wife is a special education teacher with ASD) and after crunching our numbers, putting in our retirement and what we contribute, he said what I feared he say. "Everything looks great and you two are set to retire at 65".

I was so sick to my stomach that someone could think that a person could endure nearly 40 years of law enforcement and think it was okay. After explaining that it wasn't my plan to work this job for so long, he suggested to look into getting a second job. A SECOND JOB!?! What's the point of even retiring then? So after the visit with Edwards Jones, I had to think of what was best for my family, myself, and our future. After getting home I got on the computer and did what I never thought I'd do. I searched "Law enforcement jobs in Arizona", "pensions in Arizona", law enforcement in Montana", etc. Researching this pains me that I now have to consider moving to another state. So in the last few weeks, my wife and I have looked into jobs in Arizona. We decided on Arizona because it was close to family, they had a pension, and multiple job openings for police officers and teachers. We've looked at houses, have a trip planned down there this summer, and have mentioned the idea of moving to our families. But talking about moving has not been easy. My wife, who has been in Alaska for nearly 4 years, has had the same connection to Alaska as I have. Since moving up here, she's been a special education teacher for ASD. Just her few short years up here, she's already made a name for herself. She was picked with interviewing potential principals for her elementary school, was named Technology Teacher of the year, and her peers praise her for her hard work. They even encourage her in taking leadership positions within ASD. Something you don't see in a 4 year teacher. So talking about moving has put a strain on our marriage because of everything we've both worked so hard on over the last 4 years. Starting over would be extremely difficult for us, but we both understand that retiring at 65 would be a difficult goal.

Mentioning moving to the lower 48 to my parents and family, we've received nothing but support and encouragement. Some family members even gasped in disbelief after hearing me explain that I have been working without a pension for so long. Our entire family encouraged us to move as soon as possible. Working without a defined benefit was what they called "a waste of time". Then, while talking to family and doing my own research, a good friend from APD left for Phoenix Police Department. Took him only a few months to get a job with them, they accept Alaska POSTs, and have an easier out of state hiring process. The move to Arizona has been more and more appealing to me within the last few weeks. It truly hurts thinking about moving from a state that I've grown an attachment to. But It took me nearly 4 years to realize what was always wrong with Alaska and why numbers within police departments were so low and hard to grow. Our retirement system is flawed. If it stays the same, I'm afraid my time up here will be limited. Retention at APD and other agencies are continuing to fail, more and more will realize why others have left, and money will be wasted to have one academy after another just to keep up with numbers that will never grow.

I ask for your support for House Bill 79, support for law enforcement, and to fix Alaska's retirement system. Your support will save Alaska! Thank you for your time.

Officer Rojas-Villarreal