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Testimony on House Bill 2799  
House Committee on Transportation

Jim A. Cross, Mayor  
City of Russell, Kansas

February 29, 2024

Chairman Francis and Members of the Committee:

Today, thank you for considering House Bill 2799, designating a portion of United States Highway 281 in Russell County as the First Responders Memorial Highway. As a society, we lose too many first responders each year, and the numbers are rising. The city of Russell is no stranger to this loss. On April 11, 2002, the Russell City Fire Department responded as mutual aid to a motor vehicle accident on US Highway 281 north of the city. The Russell rescue truck was the first fire department unit on the scene and found an overturned SUV and a camper that had been in tow. While working the accident scene, Chief Hemphill was struck by another vehicle. Firefighters and EMS workers on the scene treated Chief Hemphill, who was transported to Russell Regional Hospital. Despite extraordinary efforts on the part of the responders on the scene and the staff at the hospital, Chief Hemphill was later pronounced dead at the hospital. The cause of death was listed as chest, abdominal, and skull trauma.

Nationwide, we have lost 2,299 first responders in the line of duty deaths in the past five years. We are seeing the deaths trend down from a high of 713 law enforcement officers, 141 firefighters, and 38 emergency medical technicians in 2021.

During the same five-year period, Kansas lost 17 law enforcement officers in the line of duty; thankfully, we did not lose any firefighters or emergency medical technicians.

The loss does not stop with line-of-duty deaths, such as suicide or Sudden Cardiac Death, having a fatal heart attack hours after completing a fire call, to which we have lost over 100 firefighters in five years.

Naming a portion of US Highway 281 the First Responders Memorial Highway is one way to demonstrate our profound respect for those first responders who have made the ultimate sacrifice for numerous communities in Kansas and across the country.

On behalf of the families and loved ones of first responders, thank you for considering House Bill 2799, and I ask that you pass the bill favorably out of committee.