City of Torrington
Department of Police Services

William R. Baldwin Jr.
Chief of Police

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Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee:

My name is Brett Johnson. I'm a Captain in the Torrington Police Department. I am testifying in opposition to Section 4 of S.B. 3 which bans our department from purchasing and using drones made in China. This bill will, hinder public safety investigations, put officers, civilians, and suspects at risk, slow response times for life saving care, and hinder the ability to locate fleeing suspects from scenes, ultimately greatly impacting our ability to do our jobs and keep our communities safe.

The Torrington Police Department has operated a drone program since 2021, and have used drones as a force multiplier within our agency as staffing levels have continually declined. The use of drones in public safety is multi-faceted. We have used our drones to map car accident scenes which enabled state prosecutors to "observe" and understand the incident scenes in ways that previously would have required a helicopter or plane to accomplish. This has in turn led to successful prosecutions of those responsible. We have used our drones multiple times to locate fleeing suspects from scenes, as well as endangered members of society, who have fled from family or friends with the intent of harming themselves. Our drones have also been used to assist our fire department in documenting house fires where the structures have become compromised due to damage and were deemed unsafe to enter preventing any kind of investigation as to the fire's origin. In early 2024 our DJI drone with thermal imaging capability located an extremely dangerous suspect that had just committed a random home invasion and struck a uniformed police officer with a stolen vehicle. The suspect was quickly located in a swampy area that, without the drone, would have required manpower that simply does not exist. The suspect undoubtedly would have further endangered the public had he escaped the limited perimeter. The suspect was taken into custody without further harm to the public, police, or himself. The Torrington Police Department would never have had the funding for a drone with this capability had we been prohibited from purchasing DJI drones.

Our department uses Chinese-made drones primarily because they are reliable and the technology they provide are unparalleled to anything else on the market (regardless of what "reports" are being published). The DJI drones we purchased for our department were thoroughly researched prior to purchase. During the researching our operators flew a number of different brands to include Autel, Brinc, and Skydio and found them far inferior in terms of capabilities (i.e. maneuverability, ease of flight, camera components, ease of technology use, thermal integration, weather resistant components, and payload abilities, are just a few of the variables). And while

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these "variables" are difficult to qualify, using a technology that is dependable, easy to set-up and deploy each and EVERY TIME is the crux of what makes DJI based drone platforms valuable to public safety and our communities as a whole. The other aspect that CANNOT be overlooked is the cost associated with these technologies. DJI provides the most "bang for your buck", providing superior technology for a fraction of the cost associated with other brands. Brands such as Autel, Brinc, and Skydio have (from our experiences time and time again) have been found to have software that glitches regularly making the drones unsafe to fly (if they fly at all) flight components that are not easily replaceable, making the required maintenance difficult in a timely manner, and delayed deliveries on the drones themselves.

When you try and compare DJI in relation to Autel, Brinc, Skydio, etc., it is impossible to. The technology of non-DJI brands is not at the same level or operability, and banning the use of DJI drones would essentially disband the use of drones throughout state when you consider the substantial investments many departments have already made into their programs. Speaking from the perspective of the Torrington Police Department we would not reinvest in drones where we would have to pay more for a lesser quality product, and I am sure other public safety entities would not either.

At a time when police departments are severely understaffed and call volumes are going up, cheap accessible drones have served not only as a stop gap for these problems, they have no doubt reduced violent interactions between officers and suspects. Having the ability to quickly get a reliable UAV in the air during a violent or rapidly evolving situation allows officers to tactically approach suspects and citizens with reduced harm to all involved. UAVs are commonly used in conjunction with K9 units as a way to prevent K9 officers from stumbling upon the suspect and creating a potentially violent situation. The UAV operator can notify the K9 handler in advance, allowing officers on the ground to avoid the potential use of force and instead being able to engage in verbal de-escalation techniques. Removing these tools from the hands of police officers will create MORE violent encounters between police and the public.

As a department, we have committed upwards of $23,000 of taxpayer money into drones that will be grounded by this bill, and thousands of dollars more on training and related expenses to ensure our team deploys our drones effectively, and responsibly.

We understand this bill is intended to address cybersecurity concerns. Just like with any other device connected to the internet, we take appropriate steps to mitigate those threats. With our

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drone program, all of the data we collect and manage is stand-alone and separate from our regularly used department servers, making it a completely separate entity. The video and image data we collect and store, is uploaded into our evidence logs, which are also secured offsite on an independent specifically identified server.

If this bill were enacted the Torrington Police Department will no longer have the ability to sustain a drone program. We will be unable to generate the funds needed to replace our DJI drones, and would not do so anyway having to pay higher prices for a lesser product.

What is concerning with the consideration of this bill is its focus. By focusing on banning DJI drones for public safety, you're putting officers, firefighters, civilians and suspects in harm's way while also hindering the way we provide services and protection to our communities. You're looking to essentially ban a cost effective product that delivers positive outcomes for the communities within our state, while also ignoring the reality that hobbyists will still have access to DJI drones, and will still be operating them in all the same outdoor spaces as the different public safety entities currently do. What's more, is the stance that the data derived from DJI drones is different than the images and videos derived from the unsecured cell phones WE ALL access and utilize every day in our homes, public places, and places of employment. The data collected on these devices is 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This includes areas where DJI drones cannot go (military installments, airports, specific restricted areas, etc.). By supporting this bill, the positive outcomes delivered by different public safety entities throughout the state are being ignored, while not solving ANY cybersecurity issues, with the tens of thousands of drones being flown within Connecticut by private citizens who are capturing the same data, and then disseminating that data any way they please.

Thank you for your time. I'm happy to answer any questions you might have.

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