



## Department of Veterans Services

John R. Kasich, Governor

Chip Tansill, Director



### Director Chip Tansill

### Ohio Department of Veterans Services

FY 2018–2019 Budget Testimony

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Chairman McColley, Ranking Member Reece, members of the committee: I am Chip Tansill, director of the Ohio Department of Veterans Services (DVS). It is my honor to appear before you today to testify on our department's budget.

Since this agency was established in 2008, and under the continuing leadership and support of Governor Kasich, I'm proud to report that our efforts to improve the quality of life for our veterans are showing real results.

To be sure, it has been a collaborative and constructive effort between the Kasich Administration and you, the General Assembly. Credit also goes to the men and women in each of your counties who assist veterans every day. With this budget, we are building on all of that great work.

Ohio is home to 848,000 veterans — the sixth-largest veteran population in the nation. DVS is committed to connecting veterans to jobs, healthcare, education, and the federal, state and local benefits they have earned by virtue of their military service. While we have made great progress, there is always more to do.

#### **Jobs and Education**

Recent education and employment reforms established by the Kasich Administration and the General Assembly have created a fast track to jobs and education for veterans and military spouses. All of Ohio's 37 public colleges and universities are now trained to apply military experience and training toward free college credit. State licensing and certification boards now expedite applications for military members and their spouses, helping veterans turn their military training into a professional license or certification. OhioMeansVeteranJobs.com gives Ohio veterans, current service members, and their families one easy entry point to build civilian resumes, match their skills to Ohio's in-demand jobs and find military-friendly employers.

We at DVS are especially proud of our workforce section that trains and coaches employers in military culture and veteran recruitment and retention. During my time at DVS, I've heard from



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countless employers who want to hire veterans but don't know where to begin—where to look for candidates, how to interpret their military experience and how to retain veteran talent. Our regional workforce consultants, all of them veterans, serve as a constant resource for Ohio's job creators.

DVS also houses the State Approving Agency (SAA), which is funded and directed by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to ensure federal GI Bill program compliance among Ohio's institutions of higher education, vocational centers, and professional training programs.

In Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2015, the most-recent year for which we have data, the VA paid out more than \$307 million in vocational rehabilitation and education benefits to Ohio's veterans. Our SAA team also certifies apprenticeship and on-the-job training programs, many of which serve as direct pipelines to good-paying jobs. If these programs meet the criteria set by the VA, veterans can use their GI Bill benefits to cover training and cost-of-living expenses—as much as \$1,100 per month.

### **Veterans' Healthcare and Benefits**

Together with our partners, DVS continues to connect more Ohio veterans to the benefits and resources they have earned through their military service. DVS is charged with certifying and training service officers and commissioners within the 88 county veterans service offices to help veterans file VA claims. In FFY 2015, Ohio veterans received more than \$5 billion in VA compensation and pension, healthcare, vocational rehabilitation, education, and insurance and indemnities.

DVS also partnered with the departments of Medicaid and Aging to identify and contact more than 4,300 veterans who applied for Medicaid in 2016. Twenty-seven percent of those veterans were sent to their local county veterans service office for help applying for VA benefits. This is important because veterans able to move to VA healthcare rather than Medicaid may receive broader healthcare services and benefits. I want to thank the members of the last General Assembly for codifying this successful project into law.

As you know, the Kasich Administration is dedicated to supporting veterans and their families in the areas of behavioral health and suicide prevention, homelessness, and offender re-entry.

A VA study published in 2016 indicated that, nationally, an average of 20 veterans complete suicide every day. The study further determined that only six of those 20 were connected to the VA in some fashion. Nationally, the VA estimates fewer than half of all veterans are connected to VA healthcare or benefits. That means the majority of veterans who are seeking care or services are doing so by leveraging the broader services available in their communities.



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With this in mind, DVS has partnered with the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, the Ohio National Guard, the VA, and other statewide behavioral health and veteran organizations such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness and the Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation to form the Ohio Military and Veteran Behavioral Health and Suicide Prevention Collaborative. Together we will strengthen suicide prevention by coordinating services among federal, state, and community providers and improved access to culturally-competent behavioral health services.

For those veterans who require long-term care, DVS operates two veterans homes: a nursing home and domiciliary in Sandusky, and a nursing home in Georgetown. Each home provides standard nursing home care as well as memory care for residents with dementia. We offer a quality of life that encourages independence and emphasizes private, person-centered care in a comfortable, safe environment.

The homes are open to Ohio residents who are honorably discharged wartime veterans that are no longer able to earn a living, either through age or through disability. Veterans of the Ohio National Guard who are seriously injured in the performance of their duties may also be eligible. State revenue funding for the homes is offset by resident-based funding from the VA, combined with a resident assessment based on ability to pay.

### **Recognizing Veterans for their Service**

The Ohio Veterans Bonus continues a tradition of awarding bonuses to Ohio veterans that dates back to the Civil War. Eligible veterans who served on active duty since October 7, 2001, may receive a bonus ranging from \$500 to \$1,500 for service in Afghanistan and other places in the world. The bonus will remain open until the president declares an end to the Afghanistan conflict. The Persian Gulf and Iraq bonus periods closed in recent years.

We also administer the Ohio Veterans Hall of Fame, which honors veterans for their outstanding civic, professional, or community service after their military career.

DVS serves as the custodian of 1.7 million digitized military discharge records and muster logs on the service of nearly 4.3 million Ohioans dating as far back as the War of 1812. We also have access to millions more discharge records online through the federal Defense Personnel Records Information Retrieval System. These records are often vital in order for Ohio's veterans to apply for the benefits they have earned.

### **DVS Policy Proposals**

Now that we have covered our agency's programmatic work, I'd like to discuss our policy proposals in the budget. Although modest in scale, I am confident they will improve how our state serves veterans.



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### Physician Loan Repayment Program

We maintain a small number of physicians on staff at the Ohio Veterans Homes. Those physicians directly impact the quality of life of our residents. As you might imagine, physicians considering employment at our homes are weighing state salary levels versus what they could receive from private practice, working at the VA, or elsewhere.

Providing DVS the authority to operate a physician loan repayment program would give us an added incentive when recruiting and retaining doctors. Our proposal is modeled off of the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services' physician loan repayment program and would be administered by our agency without requesting any additional funds.

### Improving Veterans Access to Benefits and Resources

Through Governor Kasich's budget, Ohio will ensure state funds are directed in a manner that focuses on employment and health services to enhance the quality of life for veterans and their families. This budget is part of Ohio's ongoing commitment to the men and women who have proudly served our nation.

We need to ensure a better return on investment for veterans: Thirteen veterans organizations located across the state currently receive \$1.88 million in state funds to provide local support and services to veterans. In past budgets, those funds were awarded directly to the organizations through individual line items with no stipulations about how the state funds should be spent.

There was great disparity in how those state funds were used. In 2016, some of these organizations spent little to no state funds on service work to connect veterans to their benefits. Organizations that did spend state funds on service work brought in approximately \$28 in U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs benefits for every state dollar, according to the 2016 veterans organizations annual budget reports.

We propose aggregating the \$1.88 million into a single line item under DVS's budget and, in the second fiscal year of the biennium, converting the funds into a grant program with more rigorous reporting and accountability built in. In order to give the veterans organizations a chance to plan how to incorporate state funds moving forward, our proposal would treat the first year of the biennium as a "bridge year," during which each of the organizations would receive the same amount of funding they have received in past budgets.

In Fiscal Year 2019, the governor's budget will increase the amount available to veterans organizations to \$2 million. Each organization would receive about \$15,000 for their traditional activities, unless their organization already receives less than that. Priority for grant funding will be given to programs that connect veterans to employment, training and healthcare resources.



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Our proposal protects these veterans funds in law under the Department where we can demonstrate accountability and ensure the funds follow the veterans with the greatest need.

Let's consider the demographics of our veteran population—57 percent of Ohio's 848,000 veterans are age 60 or older, and 10,000 new Ohio veterans leave the military each year. Under the current system of 13 individual earmarks, if one organization should stop operations due to changing demographics or other reasons, that money would be returned to the General Revenue Fund and no longer dedicated to veterans. The benefit of the single line item grant program is the \$2 million stays dedicated to connecting Ohio veterans to their benefits and resources. Statute does not give DVS the authority to divert the funds for other uses.

### Increasing opportunities for County Veterans Service Offices

Continuing our focus on service work, the Governor's budget also broadens Ohio veterans service officer requirements to more closely resemble national requirements. Veterans remain the first choice to fill service officer positions; however, expanding service officer eligibility to include current and former members of the National Guard and Reserve, as well as spouses, children, or parents of veterans will allow county veterans service commissions with a shortage of applicants to hire the most committed individuals to serve our veterans. This change will allow these individuals access to state training and certification, instead of counties spending money on national training and travel costs.

We also propose standardizing county veterans service office executive director qualifications. Executive directors impact the functions and decisions made in every aspect of the office. Defining what qualifications a veterans service commission should seek when hiring an executive director will ensure a more standardized quality of care across the state.

Reducing unnecessary barriers to hiring service officers and standardizing the qualities expected in executive directors will ensure consistent quality service for veterans no matter where they live.

### **Conclusion**

We at Veterans Services look forward to working with you, Mr. Chairman, and with the members of the General Assembly to champion innovative education, workforce, and healthcare initiatives that enrich veterans' lives and sustain Ohio's reputation as a national leader for veterans and military families. This work cannot be done without the support of the counties, our cabinet agency partners and of course you, the General Assembly.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and members of the Finance Subcommittee on Transportation, for your time and consideration today. I am happy to answer any questions you have.