

My name is Brook Harless and I am representing the American Legion's 10th district of Ohio. In our district alone we represent 66 posts containing 8521 members. I am a Disabled Army veteran who is retired from the Army. I am here today to discuss with the Committee about House Bill 49. The reason I want to discuss this bill is in regard to the pages that concern veteran funding. Not only do I want to point out what I feel along with my fellow Legionnaires are mistakes in this House bill but I want to show why I feel these are mistakes.

When looking at the beginning of page 2915 it states: proposed changes to grant funding priority to be given to organizations and programs to improve access to veterans and their families to benefits and resources from the Department of Veteran Affairs, it specifically states "employment and opportunities" while vaguely stating "or other resources". What are these other resources? The bill needs to be more specific about what other resources they mean as it could be harmful what organizations the grant funding goes to.

Director Tansill of the Ohio Department of Veteran Services testified before the Ohio House of Representatives Finance Subcommittee on Transportation on Tuesday, February 21, 2017 that priority would be given to those organizations that ".....connect veterans to employment, training, and healthcare resources." When he was testifying, he made no mention of Veteran Service Organizations providing service work to veterans. This is sad as Veteran Service Organizations provide much service work to veterans. Veteran Service Organizations help veterans like myself to fill out Department of Veteran Affairs forms such as claim assistance, inform us on VA benefits, and provide a wide range of help to us as well as to our dependents. They also will help with career guidance and more such as Ohio Means Jobs.

Making the transition from the military world back to the civilian world is a challenging task. The problem is compounded if you are still recovering from combat, recuperating from wounds, moving to a new location, transitioning with a family to take care of, and many other factors. This is where Veterans Service Organizations come into play and were created to help veterans and their families or their survivors.

Many of these organizations offer educations and job training, job fairs, resume writing services such as at Ohio Means Jobs, financial grants, opportunities to participate in community service projects, and more. In most cases, these services are free. The best part? Is for someone like myself I get to tap into the experience and expertise of service officers who have been there, done that, walk the walk, talk the talk, and know how and where to get help. If these organizations can't help you, they can certainly put you into contact with someone who can.

In Stark County where I live, representatives from various veteran organizations have developed a Veteran Task Force. We meet once a month and we discuss those veterans who may be homeless or in need what we can do to help them, where they need to go, and how to get them on the right track. When Director Tansill testified, and failed to mention Veteran Service Organizations, he did all the VSO's an injustice.

He failed to mention how the Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services and Ohio Means Jobs are well established to assist with employment. They take each veteran step by step through the process to ensure the veteran gets employment.

He failed to mention the Department of Labor has Disabled Veterans Outreach Program Specialist to assist disabled veterans with employment endeavors. Service Organizations should not be helping Veterans find employment when their job is service work.

Director Tansill also stated that all 501(c)3 organizations could in fact apply for a grant. This has the potential of opening doors to dozens and possibly hundreds of organizations to apply for a grant that might not be as helpful or beneficial to veterans.

The proposed change, as presented, will remove \$1,880,000 in general funding line item funding not only to the American Legion but to approximately 12 other national Veteran Service Organizations like the DAV (Disabled American Veterans), Paralyzed Veterans of America, VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars), Vietnam Veterans of America, etc.; about half of which provide direct services to Ohio and Stark County Veterans and direct support to the Stark County Veteran Service Commission as well.

The changes that are being proposed in House Bill 49 are going to dismantle and disrupt veteran services to veterans and their families. It sounds like it will be breaking up all the veteran organizations which will cause much conflict within our state to my fellow veterans. I could go on and on about all the benefits Veteran Organizations provide to our veterans. Veteran Service Organizations like Veteran Service Commission give individual assistance. They review our benefits eligibility to see which benefits programs you may be eligible to receive if any. They will go through my service records, medical records, and other information I provide to help me identify which I may be able to receive. They not only help you with filing VA benefits but also will place a claim for education or training benefits, and more. Some Veteran Service Organizations offer grants, training, scholarships, and other forms of assistance.

From my understanding, this bill will want to hire nonveterans to become directors. I feel this will be a detrimental mistake since veterans feel more comfortable working with other veterans. As I mentioned before, this is important to veterans especially battle hardened veterans to be able to have a comrade who has their back. If employees in a Veteran Service Organizations are veterans themselves, why would their director not be? These organizations have worked for all these years because of this. Because their director is a veteran themselves. They know how important it is to get the job done. To help their fellow veteran.

We are also under the impression the operating budget will now be 10% given to Ohio Department of Veterans Services instead of the 1/13th it used to be due to the grant process having to be applied for now. Is there a process in place? How will this work? Will this ensure it will help veterans in the state?

The wording of this proposed bill is making it where the VSO's are going to start turning onto each other. Will outside organizations be added to this cut of the pie?

I see firsthand what a lot of these organizations do. How important they are to veterans and their families. I am an active member in quite a few and give speeches about local veteran organizations in my county. The American legion district I belong to is the 4th biggest in the state. The American Legion is one of the largest military organizations, with over 2.4 million members. We offer a wide range of programs that extend to local communities up to the national level, where they lobby on behalf of our nation's veterans like I am doing so today. Some of the benefits programs the American Legion offers are filing veteran benefits claim, veteran employment assistance through job fairs, networking, and more like the Stark County Veteran Stand Down I am co-chairing with Congressman Renacci's Director of

Veteran Services. They also will help veterans understand and use our military education benefits, health and medical coverage for certain wounded, injured, or ill veterans through the Heroes to Hometowns and Operations Comfort Warriors Program. The American Legion will also find a service officer to assign to you. They provide seniors with scholarships, send kids to boys and girls state, and more.

AmVets help with services to veterans such free assistance for compensation and benefits claims, transition assistance, career centers, scholarships for high school seniors or veterans pursuing higher education. They are always advocating for veterans' benefits, adequate VA funding, services for homeless veterans and more.

The DAV (Disabled American Veterans) help as well with job search assistance, disaster relief, filing a VA benefit claim, transition assistance benefits claims, transportation to and from the VA, outreach programs and information seminars, and more. The VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars) do just as much as the above mentioned veteran organizations I just discussed.

All these Veteran Organizations I am mentioning are so beneficial to our Veterans and their families. I would hope when you do the final amendments of this bill, you think long and hard about who it will affect and how.

Ohio is one of the few states providing comprehensive support and services to its veterans. Let us not take this away. In each of the 88 counties in Ohio, Veterans Service Organizations such as the Veterans Service Commission are dedicated to aiding veterans in time of need.

Like I mentioned in the beginning of my testimony, I am a veteran. The ability to adequately and effectively provide veterans with help within the Veteran Service Organizations as advertised is important. When most people think of Veteran Service Organizations such as the American Legion or VFW they think of older veterans who do nothing but sit around and drink a beer at a bar. Let me tell you first hand, that is not true. There are so much these organizations do for veterans and their communities. I could be here for hours if I went into every detail all that these organizations provide. These organizations such as the American Legion and the Veteran Service Commission have helped me. Veteran Organizations are non-government organizations that advocate for and assist Veterans like myself while also providing opportunities for Veterans to get involved in the larger community. We need your help in continuing to ensure we maintain what these organizations have built. The American Legion is the nation's largest wartime veteran service organizations, committed to helping youth and sponsorship of wholesome programs in our communities, advocating for patriotism and honor, promoting strong devotion to our fellow servicemembers and veterans. Our sense of obligation to our community, state, and nation drives us. Most people don't realize we created the GI Bill, helped create the Boy Scouts of America, and more. I have had 36 surgeries due to military injuries and if it was not for these organizations, I would have been lost. We at the American Legion sincerely hope if this house bill 49 does go through that the veteran organizations so many of us are a part of are taken care of.

Thank you.