

**House Finance Committee  
House Bill 282  
Proponent Testimony  
24 October 2019**

Chairman Oelslager, Vice Chair Scherer, Ranking Member Cere, and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony in support of House Bill 282.

My name is Suzette Heller and I am the State Adjutant for The American Legion Department of Ohio headquartered in Delaware, Ohio.

The American Legion Department of Ohio is a leading veterans-service organization with 526 posts in Ohio which keeps membership of over 95,000 wartime veterans in all 88 counties. We have over 30,000 members of the Sons of American Legion and 50,000 members of The American Legion Auxiliary. The American Legions' positions represent the views of its' members which are based on four pillars: Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation, National Security, Americanism, and Children & Youth.

The American Legion Department of Ohio is extremely thankful to Representative Adam Holmes, and Representative Jeff LaRe for their thoughtful approach in drafting and introducing House Bill 282 which will allow our American Legion post to offer our members an electronic form of instant bingo for charitable purposes.

# THE AMERICAN LEGION DEPARTMENT OF



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Today, I will share about the mission of the local American Legion Post, why our Legionnaires participate in charitable gaming, and how House Bill 282 will further the impact of The American Legion Post within their local community and the State of Ohio.

The 526 American Legion Posts located in many of our small towns and large metropolitan areas across the state of Ohio range in membership size of 25 to 1,000 wartime veterans who identify as a “Legionnaire”. A local post may also be home to an American Legion Auxiliary Unit or a Sons of The American Legion Squadron. A local post operates autonomously within the parameters of their constitution and by-laws, under the direction of an elected board by the members of the specific post. Therefore, the services and programs provided to our membership and to our communities may vary. Let me provide examples for you:

In the 48<sup>th</sup> House District, American Legion Post 44 in North Canton has 603 active members for the year 2020. From the moment you pull into the parking lot of the Post, you will see decaded vans parked in its lot. Those vans are used to escort the Posts Honor Guard which is a small group of veterans who belong to that Post and perform honors and ceremonies at a funeral home or gravesite for veterans and members who gone onto Post Everlasting.

They are in full uniform with ceremonial rifles in hand, prepared to give veterans the dignity and honor they earned and deserved. They may perform up to three funerals in one day and upward of at least half a dozen in a week. The uniforms they wear are special ordered for these ceremonies. The vehicle, fuel, and auto insurance must all be paid for. When they return for the day, they may sit as a group, in the canteen of that Post and have lunch or dinner together to talk about their day and what their obligations are the remainder of the week.

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At the same time, there are others who are in that Post who may be enjoying a lunch or dinner. They are all members of that Post, maybe a guest or two. They could not enter that Post unless they were escorted with a member. Members come to that Post because they are with others who share in their experiences of having served this country. The Commander of that Post is on a conference call with the Mayor of North Canton every week, listening for ways The American Legion can be useful in their community.

On the other side of that Post is a meeting hall separate from the Canteen. In that hall is where the official business of that Post is held by members of Post 44. Decisions are being made as to which members will go to Hoover High School and administrate an Americanism & Government Test to the students. The test itself is paid for and administrated by members of that Post.

Over 350 American Legion Posts have relationships with their local high schools to educate and promote Americanism in our youth through American Legion Buckeye Boy State, Americanism & Government Tests which reward the top 14 scores which an educational week in Washington D.C., through our Oratorical Constitutional Speech Scholarship Competition, Scouting, and American Legion Baseball programs. These programs are paid for by members directly or through participation in charitable gaming. Some members have no desire to ever step foot into a casino which removes millions from the local economy each month. A large majority play games in a responsible manner and it is fun for them and they know the monies are being used to support veterans and children and youth in their community.

Another way a local post may distribute charitably fundraised dollars is by providing temporary financial assistance to veterans and families who may be temporarily displaced or are

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in need. Our Posts also have trained volunteer post service officers, whom we train annually, who are able to provide guidance to a veteran or dependent seeking access or clarification of VA benefits. An American Legion local post is instrumental in fundraising for local veteran memorials and organizing community events that honor our veterans.

We shall not stop there. Our American Legion Posts directly support veterans receiving care at our Ohio Veterans Homes and VA facilities through our *Gifts for Yanks* Program which its annual budget has remained at-or above \$200,000 and is entirely fundraised through Post contributions. Earlier this year, our *Gifts for Yanks* Program was able to donate \$100,000.00 to the brand-new Greater Cleveland Fisher House.

Each year on Christmas Day, I attend a Gift distribution at Chillicothe VA Medical Center and spend time with patients who are there for the holidays. After the distribution and camaraderie, we travel to American Legion Post 62 in Downtown Chillicothe on main street and the members of that Post make a wonderful breakfast and fundraise over \$7,000.00 on Christmas morning for the Gifts For Yanks Program. A majority of those funds are from the surrounding Posts Charitable Gaming activities. By the way, breakfast is free for all who attend. I have never witnessed so many generous people in one place, at 7am on Christmas morning, than at the Chillicothe VAMC and at Post 62 in Chillicothe.

American Legion Irvin Hiskey Post 535 located in Bellville, Ohio has invested over \$19,000 in the last 19 months to local charities. Post 535 donated \$4,800 to Clear Fork School District as a mini-grant for teachers to access for classroom supplies; Purchased American Flags and flag poles for every classroom at Bellville and Butler Elementary Schools, supported local Scouting units to help purchase uniforms, and supported music and athletic boosters. This is the

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impact Post 535 had in their community after contributing 25% of their net profit to The American Legion Department of Ohio Charities Inc. and Ohio Advocates for Kids. Through charitable gaming, The American Legion Post 535 can invest in their local community.

In summary, charitable gaming is a post member benefit for our members to enjoy, while remaining engaged in efforts that is for a good cause. Most of our members, choose to participate in charitable gaming like instant bingo, because it is competitive, there is always a chance to win, it's a game they can enjoy with a like-minded community – the veteran community, and they know that the proceeds support their post operations and are invested into the community rather than a large for-profit corporation. I have personally, observed Legionnaires donate their winnings to a charitable program of their choosing.

When you are an active member of a local post, you are a member of a family. No one enters an American Legion Post without being engaged in conversation with another veteran. The Legionnaires' spouse and children are often known on a first-name basis within the post. Charitable gaming is conducted in a secure and monitored area where minors are not permitted. Since the local post is familial in nature, our Legionnaires seldomly lack the courage to intervene in any concerning manner. Charitable gaming is a post member benefit - that is not available to the public or accessible to minors – that results in a positive impact within the local community.

I have described the mission of the local post and the impact of the local post in its local community, but the question remains, how will House Bill 282 impact The American Legion post? House Bill 282 will permit a legal electronic format of instant bingo. Electronic instant

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bingo will play in the same manner as the paper form with a limited number of tickers and a defined prize and payout structure.

Overall, House Bill 282 will provide a clear path forward for American Legion post who desire to add an electronic version of a legal game for charitable purposes which will increase the overall financial investment to serving veterans, helping families with children in need, and promoting Americanism among our children and youth.

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I look forward to answering any questions you may have.