



## The American Legion Department of Ohio

60 Big Run Road, Delaware OH 43015  
740-362-7478 · 740-362-1429 (Fax)  
[www.ohiolegion.com](http://www.ohiolegion.com)

**FROM THE DESK OF:**

*Suzette M. Price, Service Director*  
740-362-7478 Ext. 2  
[price@ohiolegion.com](mailto:price@ohiolegion.com)

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### HB 64 OPERATING BUDGET

*The following is The American Legion – Department of Ohio testimony to the Ohio Senate, Finance – General Government Subcommittee. The intention of this testimony is to make clear the urgency of continued partnership with the State of Ohio in the form of a grant to support the efforts of our organization in advocating for veterans and their benefits with The Department of Veterans Affairs. All supporting evidence and documentation can be found with the Office of Budget and Management and with The Ohio Department of Veteran Services.*

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**Thank you Mr. Chairman Kris Jordan, Vice Chair Lou Gentile, Senator John Eklund, Senator Shannon Jones, Senator Bob Peterson, and Senator Michael Skindell for the opportunity to represent The American Legion Department of Ohio before you today.**

**The American Legion is an organization of war-time veterans dedicated to the principles of mutual helpfulness and assistance to all veterans, widows, dependents, and military, whether they are Legionnaires or not. Our membership nationally expands to over 2.5 million members and locally there are 560 posts with over 100,000 members statewide. We are Ohio's largest veteran service organization and rounding a celebratory 100 years in 2019!**

**It is with gratitude that in the 2014 and 2015 fiscal budget year(s) we received a grant of \$349,000 from the State of Ohio. These funds are specifically utilized for the operations of our (6) service offices that currently assist each of the 88 County Veteran Service Offices (CVSO's) and over 150 County Veteran Service Officers who are accredited with our organization and are employed by the various Counties. Due to the high levels of expertise and experience, we are the largest supporter of the CVSO's and the front runner each quarter for claims submissions to The Department of Veterans Affairs.**

**The main hub of our operations for Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation (VA&R) is co-located with The Department of Veterans Affairs which is located at the Anthony J. Celebreeze federal building in downtown Cleveland. We have (3) full-time accredited Department Service Officers (DSO) and (2) support staff at that location. We also operate offices with one DSO each at the Cleveland VAMC, Dayton VAMC, Cincinnati VAMC, Toledo CBOC, and myself with (1) support staff at the Columbus VA and Department Headquarters located in Delaware. This makes for a total of (9) full-time employees who do a variety of different tasks, most at an expert level and in conjunction with the 38 Code of Federal Regulations (38 CFR) which governs Veterans Benefits and Laws. The**

cost of the operations for these locations, salaries alone, was \$355,060.84, not including payroll taxes and expenses, health insurance, and retirement plan contributions, which equates to an additional \$173,381.12. The CVSO's are able to hire their County Veteran Service Officers at a competitive wage, ranging anywhere from \$35,000 to \$40,000, in most counties, to start, also with a fabulous benefit package as a county employee. We are barely breaking the \$35,000 range of which a Veteran Service Officer is to support their households, many of whom are disabled veterans themselves.

The training for the DSO's and support staff is specific in nature and is required twice a year at the Washington D.C. and Indianapolis locations. We are trained by the National Veterans Legal Services Program whom has played a key role in the obtainment and advocacy for veterans in ensuring their benefits are secured. In 2013-2014 the cost of training our people at nearly the same level of training as a County Veteran Service Officer was roughly \$10,000.00. This includes transportation, lodging, and food at a per diem far less than a state employee. We have recently partnered with the Ohio State Association of County Veteran Service Officers (OSACVSO) to bring The American Legion training right here to Ohio in order to save costs to the CVSO's who are accredited with our organization, and to be more inclusive and transparent of our organization.

In 2013, The Department of Veterans Affairs provided a GDX of the veteran population in the State of Ohio. There are 877,894 veterans residing right here in Ohio. The Department of Veterans Affairs spent \$6.643 billion dollars here in Ohio to take care of these veterans and did so with \$1.837 billion in Compensation and Pension monies which is a monthly monetary benefit from the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). The State of Ohio spends \$3.4 million between the Ohio Department of Veteran Services (\$1.7 million) and the Veteran Service Organizations (\$1.7 million), which is divided amongst. In March we asked the House for an increase of ten percent, totaling an additional \$34,900 dollars. Today, we realize that the tasks at hand costs far more than that.

The American Legion currently has 3,217 appeals pending right here in the Cleveland VARO. Our National Staff has found that nearly eighty percent of the cases that reach the Board of Veterans Appeals becomes either remanded back to the Cleveland VARO for further evidence, or has overturned the decisions of the VA raters in Cleveland. We are doing the best we can with the resources we have but have found that in addition to the expansion of The Department of Veterans Affairs, our organizations also need to grow in comparison. Our structure, training, and claims processing is already established and what we need are people. Our technology is also in need of upgrading, which our Charities, Inc., has been supporting the last three years. With the increase of two staff members and advancement of technology, we believe adding \$100,000 to our grant monies is sufficient.

We are very creative of which we find support to help our veterans. Our membership base supports us through small donations to our VA&R programs, but also takes care of the veteran in ways we see directly in our communities. For example, your local cemetery has a funeral detail several times a week provided by The American Legion to give our veterans the proper burial they so deserve. Our young boys and girls are provided the opportunities to attend Buckeye Boys State and Buckeye Girls State, sponsored by the generous Legionnaires of your communities. Our Child Welfare Foundation gave away nearly \$30,000 last year to keep veterans and their families in their homes and to prevent homelessness, in addition to what the CVSO's provide. The American Legion Department of Ohio, Charities, Inc., gave away over \$200,000 last year for various causes in the State of Ohio, mainly in support of issues affecting veterans. We believe in giving away what we have in order to keep balance, but we are also humble enough to ask for help when needed. Today, we need the help of you, the Legislators, who make decisions to do what is

**right with the monies of the investments and taxpayers of the State of Ohio and ask you this: If the Federal Government believes investing \$6.643 billion dollars into the 877,894 million veterans of the State of Ohio, what is fair and right for our State Government to invest?**

**There isn't a wrong answer and we appreciate every penny we receive and ask for a fair increase of the grant monies being offered. On behalf of The American Legion Department of Ohio, the war-time veterans of the State of Ohio, we thank you for your time and conscientious decision making.**

V/r,

**Suzette Price  
Service Director**