

Disabled American Veterans, Department of Ohio
Proponent Testimony for HB47 Students to Soldiers Act
Presented by Legislative Director Frank Williams

Chairman Brenner, Vice Chairman Slaby, Ranking Member Fedor, and members of the Education and Career Readiness Committee. Thank you for this opportunity to speak today in support of HB47, Students to Soldiers Support Act. I am Frank Williams, Past State Commander, Past State Adjutant, & National Executive Committee Member, currently State Inspector and Legislative Director for the Disabled American Veterans, Department of Ohio.

We were once students during our formative years, with our families and friends having a great deal of influence in our plans for the future. Needless to say patriotism, shown by a family member who served our country by joining the military, was a positive factor. With this in mind, and since I was once a Soldier who served for twenty years, I would like to tell you a story about a young student here in Ohio.

Courtney Paptic is a Senior and member of the girl's basketball team at West Branch High School in Youngstown, Ohio. Courtney developed a desire to serve her country at an admirably early age. To put this wish into action, she made her way to the Youngstown Air Reserve Station where she volunteered for upcoming duty in the Air Force Reserves upon graduation, thus joining a growing number of High School students interested in serving their country. One of her first steps was enrolling in the preparatory training program that new recruits are required to attend before leaving for Basic Training. This initial training is called "Boot Camp" in the Navy. Unfortunately, one of these training sessions conflicted with one of Courtney's basketball practices. So, after weighing her priorities, she chose to attend the mandatory training.

Following team rules, the high school basketball coach benched Courtney for the next game for missing the practice. However, he was unaware of the importance of the mandatory military formation and training that Courtney attended. When the community vigorously responded to what was viewed as his lack of respect and consideration of military service, the coach issued a public apology.

This incident illustrates a gap, or weakness, in our military protection laws since USERRA only applies to employees who are paid to work, not students, even though individuals in high school or college are just as likely to undergo training or other activities as a part of their service obligations. So young men and women like Courtney have to miss a team practice for mandatory training, they could very well lose privileges at their school or college, or lose the opportunity to participate at the level they want to.

HB47 would correct this situation as schools and colleges would be prohibited from barring students from participating in an extracurricular activity, or any part of that activity, because of an absence due to military service. We want to give those individuals who choose to serve our country – especially those who are active in other ways in their communities – the support they need, and deserve.

I thank you for allowing me to meet with you today, and thank you for your past and continued support for Ohio's Veterans.