



Department of Veterans Services

John R. Kasich, Governor

Chip Tansill, Director



Director Chip Tansill Ohio Department of Veterans Services FY 2018–2019 Budget Testimony May 16, 2017

Chairman Jordan, Senator O'Brien, 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.

Under the continuing leadership of Governor Kasich, I'm proud to report that our efforts to improve the quality of life for our veterans are showing real results, thanks to the collaboration between the Kasich Administration and you, the General Assembly. Credit also goes to the men and women in your counties who assist veterans every day.

With this budget, we continue to build on this great work.

Ohio is home to 830,000 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.

Connecting Veterans' to Healthcare and Benefits is central to our mission.

Together with our partners, DVS continues to connect more Ohio veterans to their benefits and resources. 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.



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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 and are no longer able to earn a living, either through age or through disability. 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 Persian Gulf and Iraq bonus periods closed in recent years.

DVS also administers 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. DVS also has access to millions more discharge records online. 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.

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.



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Our proposal is modeled on 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 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 Ohio's 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.

According to the 2016 Veterans Organizations Annual Budget Reports, organizations that did spend state funds on service work brought in \$28 of federal U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) funding for every \$1 the state spent. Our goal is to create more opportunities for service work to connect veterans to their VA compensation, healthcare and benefits.

In the Introduced version of the Operating Budget, we proposed a grant system to prioritize funding for programs that connect veterans to VA benefits, healthcare, job opportunities and training resources. Although removed, we look forward to working with the Senate and the interested parties toward our common goal of connecting more veterans to their benefits through service work.

More of Ohio's heroes receiving their much-deserved benefits and more transparency of the public's tax dollars is possible, and we look forward to working toward a solution that works for all involved.

Increasing Opportunities for County Veterans Service Offices

Continuing our focus on service work, the Governor's budget broadens Ohio veterans service officer requirements. Veterans remain the first choice to fill veterans service officer positions; however, expanding veterans 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 no qualified applicants to hire the most committed individuals to serve our veterans.



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County veterans service offices are already permitted to hire veterans' family members to serve in office support positions. Frequently these individuals perform CVSO duties under different working titles. This change will make these individuals eligible to be accredited through the State of Ohio training and certification program at home instead of spending money on national training and travel. The change also allows the DVS Director to revoke these individuals' certification if necessary—something that cannot be done under the current system.

I want to clarify a misunderstanding that DVS is changing the definition of veteran. DVS is simply aligning with Ohio's more inclusive definition of veteran that was passed unanimously by the General Assembly in establishing Veterans Rights in September 2014 (HB 488)

We also propose standardizing county veterans service office executive director qualifications.

Reducing unnecessary barriers to hiring service officers and standardizing the qualities expected in executive directors will ensure service for veterans continues to advance in Ohio.

House Provisions

An amendment in the House instructs DVS to create a jobs website specifically for Ohio's veterans. Currently, 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 respectfully ask to work with the Senate to ensure that the current OhioMeansVeteranJobs.com best aligns with the needs of Ohio's veterans.

The House passed version of the bill also includes a provision to create a state veteran peer-to-peer network. There are several exemplary veteran peer-to-peer operations already in existence around Ohio. The Assistant Director and I were at one just last Thursday where we saw firsthand the good work of Bunker Labs, one of many private organizations helping our honorable veterans connect with one another. We believe that private programs like Bunker Labs, Overwatch Partnership, and others in Ohio already are doing a wonderful job and that the directive would be unable to be carried out without specific funding. We look forward to continuing to work with the Senate on this provision and believe DVS could better serve to inventory these programs and make them known to more Ohio veterans.



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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, veterans organizations and our cabinet agency partners and, of course, you, the General Assembly. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, members of the Finance Subcommittee on General Government and Agency Review, for your time and consideration today.

I am happy to answer any questions you have.