

Traci Washington
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Ohio Senate Government Oversight and Reform Committee

Ohio Statehouse
1 Capitol Square
Columbus, OH 43215

Good Afternoon,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today on behalf of my fellow Veterans in support of HB 282. As an army retiree and former service Chief at the Department of Veterans Affairs at the Columbus VA medical center, I have had an opportunity to see firsthand how organizations like the American Legion, AMVET's, VFW Ohio Charities and other Veteran Organizations have been able to support our Veterans.

As the former Chief of Voluntary Services at the Columbus VA for the past 13 years, I have witnessed how these organizations have consistently provided for our Veterans in every possible scenario. Also, even though they are different organizations, they have always come together as one with a common goal of putting our Veterans first. The Columbus VA has approximately 43,000 Veterans enrolled and approximately 110 social workers employed there who are constantly receiving requests from Veterans in need. Every day there are hardship situations that arise with these Veterans for which "tax dollars" cannot pay. The American Legion, AMVETS, VFW, VFW Ohio Charities and other Veteran Service Organizations are the first to answer the call to assist these Veterans.

I want to share with you just a few of the ways these organizations have helped:

- Many of our Veterans are unable to make it to their (much needed) medical appointments because they do not have the funds or access to transportation. Transportation is not a "benefit" that Veterans are entitled to and many of our Veterans are only able to gain access to their medical appointments because of charity funds from these Veterans Organizations. When appropriate, these organizations provide gas cards or bus passes so that transportation is not a barrier. They have even helped to fund a LYFT (ride share) so that our elderly Veterans can get to their appointments. Also, there are times when a physician will contact voluntary services to let them know that a Veteran needs to be seen urgently. If there is no volunteer driver available, which is often the case, this ride share service is the only option to get these Veterans in to be seen.
- The VFW Ohio Charities has funded a social worker fund at all five Ohio VA Medical facilities – Cincinnati, Columbus, Cleveland, Chillicothe and Dayton so that Veterans with emergent needs such as:
 - Providing funds to avoid utility disconnections.
 - needing funds so Veterans can get an identification card to secure a job.
 - Providing funds for Diapers and formula for their babies
 - Payment for car repairs so that Veterans can maintain employment.
 - Providing funds so that Veterans with food insecurities can keep food on the table for their families.
- There have been instances when a family didn't have the means to pay for one of our nations' heroes funerals...the charities help, so that the Veteran could have a dignified funeral service.
- Some of our Veterans coming to their medical appointments can't walk very well so they have purchased Patient Transport Carts so that Veterans arriving for their medical appointments can be transported to and from the parking lot when they arrive for their medical appointments.

- Morale building events such as our Holiday Party that serves nearly 3,000 Veterans and their families every year, our Thanksgiving Luncheon that serves nearly 500 Veterans, and our Valentines for Veterans Dinner/Concert and Dance that gives nearly 700 Veterans an opportunity to enjoy a night out.

The Columbus VA's Homeless Veteran Outreach team does an excellent job of ensuring that they identify Veterans that are homeless...and helping them to secure housing. I remember our Homeless Outreach Social Worker discovered there was a Veteran with a wife and eight (8) Children. They were homeless. While our social workers utilized programs in place to secure housing for this family, it was donations from the American Legion, AMVETS, VFW Ohio Charities and other VSO's who were able help this family sustain that housing by providing donations that we were able to utilize for food, clothing, utilities, and basic household items until the Veteran was able to get back on his feet with gainful employment to support his family.

Some might say that there are other organizations that provide some of these services to Veterans. The difference is that through donations from the Veterans Charities, we are able to provide immediate assistance to these Veterans, whereas with other agencies there might be a lengthy wait before the Veteran even knows whether or not they have been approved for assistance.

I can say without a doubt that without the support of these organizations, many of our Veterans basic and urgent needs would not be met. When a Veteran has a hardship such as needing food, shelter, or clothing, there is no time to spare. Many Veterans also struggle with behavioral health issues, and struggling with meeting their basic needs can exacerbate those struggles. Many of you are likely aware that more than 20 Veterans take their lives every day; we need every partner possible to support our Veterans and their stability, especially in times like this, when so many are experiencing major economic struggles.