

HB 33 - Establishes operating appropriations for fiscal years 2024-2025

Testimony of David K. Root
State Legislative Chairman, Department of Ohio VFW
Before the House Finance Subcommittee on Transportation
Tuesday, 21, 2923

Chairman Patton, Vice Chairman Skindell, Ranking Member Cutrona, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for allowing me to offer testimony on House Bill 33.

My name is David Root. I am State Legislative Chairman for the Department of Ohio, Veterans of Foreign Wars. I am also a past State Commander.

For several years I was a member of the Finance Committee in the Ohio VFW. It was an eight-person committee, and we would meet four times a year. At our meetings –lasting no more than two hours -we would go over fifteen or so pages of figures. Our budget was a little over 1.3 million dollars.

Now I look at House Bill 33 –over 4,300 pages, referred to numerous committees and subcommittees all hold hearings multiple times, and listen to hundreds of individuals -like myself, all pleading for a bigger piece of the pie. A pie totaling more than 40 billion dollars.

I do not envy you.

I would like to address Section 414.10 of the budget located on pages 4249 and 4250. I have attached the Legislative Budget Office Redbook for Veterans' Organizations as an easy reference.

On page one, you will see that the executive budget provides not quite \$2.5 million for each year in General Revenue Fund subsidies. There are 13 veteran organizations that serve Ohio's veterans. Those subsidies range from 15,000 to 400,000 dollars for each organization. Also explained are the primary mission of a Veteran Service Organization, how the VSOs are funded, what they are to use the state subsidies for, and the requirements to receive the subsidies.

The most important thing here is that the state subsidies are to be used primarily to provide services to veterans and their families that will help assist with accessing benefits. Accredited service officers are provided to file claims and do what is necessary to get veterans and their families disability benefits and to help them navigate through the bureaucratic red tape of the Department of Veterans Affairs. They provide many other services as well.

Most of the 13 veteran organizations that receive state subsidies do not have accredited service officers. Some of them only have a few posts and very few members. The four biggest organizations in Ohio have hundreds of posts and tens of thousands of members. They also have four to eight paid accredited veterans service officers. That is the reason for the \$400,000 in the budget for the 'Big Four' and lesser amounts for the others.

In the previous calendar year six accredited VFW service officers who are in Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Dayton filed nearly 2,600 claims, filed Power of Attorneys for nearly 3,200 veterans, accessed more than 4,000 veteran's files, and cleared more than 10,000 ratings. Our service officers also received nearly 8,400 emails, phone calls, letters, and other correspondences. That is just some of their many accomplishments during 2022.

After a long and hard-fought battle, on August 10, 2022, President Biden signed the '*Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act of 2022*' into law. It is simply known as the *PACT Act*. It establishes substantial legislative changes in laws administered by the VA and allow for compensation for thousands of veterans suffering from the effect of toxins they encountered during several conflicts. The effect on our VSOs will be substantial. Since the first of the year when it took effect, the number of claims filed has skyrocketed. As the year moves on, claims could reach record numbers and the appeals will as well. Our service officer budget is already stretched thin, yet we know we will need to hire one more service officer and possibly open a fourth office to handle the expected increased workload.

Even if we did not foresee a substantial increase in the workload, our overall expenses are going to increase because the increase in the annual Social Security adjustment. After many years of inflation rates under 2.5%, we saw them hit 7% in 2021, 6.5% in 2022, and an estimated 6% for 2023. Yet the GRF total for the 13 Veteran Service Organizations remains the same as the previous two years. Three years of sizable increases in the inflation rate and no raise in the subsidies is the equivalent of a cutback.

If you are thinking... 'Well, helping veterans is a nice thing, but how will it benefit all my other constituents?' I have your answer. In 2022 the VFW Service Officers were able to get veterans here in Ohio 113.4 million dollars in compensations and another 1.8 million in pensions. There were also death benefits and other benefits awarded to our veterans and their families for a total of \$160 million. I cannot imagine how many more dollars will come into our state due to the PACT Act. Whatever the amount, that is money your Ohio Veterans are putting back into the economy of Ohio each year.

I'm sure the other VSOs have the same appreciation the VFW does, and we all thank the general assembly for recognizing the important work we do in Ohio with the subsidies. But we also hope the members of this subcommittee and all members of the General Assembly understand our plight and agree that an increase in the subsidies is necessary for us to operate efficiently and effectively during the next two years.

I am not going to ask for a specific amount. I will leave that decision to all those who are responsible for delivering to the governor a balance budget. I ask for an amount that is based on what you, in your hearts feel should be provided so that all our veterans can receive the fair and proper services they deserve.

As you are considering, please be mindful that our portion of a 42-billion-dollar budget is minimal. If you were to double our portion -and please don't take that as a request -but even if you doubled it, the overall budget would only increase by about six one thousandths of one percent.

Thank you for allowing me to testify and if the members have any questions, I will try to answer them.