

Chair Roemer, Vice Chair Merrin, Ranking Member Troy, and all honorable members of the House Ways & Means Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on HB 126. My name is Laurence D. Reed. I am a retired Captain in the Commissioned Corps of the U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS). I served America for 33 years of Uniformed Service--first in the Medical Service Corps of the U.S. Army before transferring my commission to the USPHS.

Introduction

As you know, HB 126 would expand municipal tax exemption of pay for all members of the uniformed services, including officers of the USPHS and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

Along with the six branches of the U.S. Armed Forces (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and Space Force), the Commissioned Corps of the USPHS and NOAA make up the eight Uniformed Services of the United States (10 USC 101(a)(5), 37 USC 101(3)). For practical purposes, pay, allowances, benefits, rights, and privileges are equivalent for all eight Uniformed Services. USPHS and NOAA officers are on active duty twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Furthermore, USPHS and NOAA officers take the same oath of office as members of the Armed Services. Therefore, Federal law makes little distinction in the treatment of USPHS and NOAA officers—active duty or retired—compared to the Armed Forces.

In 2008, House Bill 372 provided, among other matters, a tax exemption for retirement income earned by retirees of the then five military branches of the Uniformed Services. However, HB 372 at the time did not include USPHS and NOAA commissioned officers. In 2013, Rep. Peter Stautberg introduced an amendment to the biennial budget bill (after two stand-alone bills, HB 188 and 239, failed to advance in the Senate) that corrected this oversight by expanding the exemption for retirement income to include USPHS and NOAA officers. By analogy, HB 126 would provide parity by expanding Ohio's Armed Forces municipal tax exemption to members of all eight Uniformed Services.

USPHS Historical Background

The USPHS has a history dating back to 1798 when the 5th U.S. Congress passed "An Act for the Relief of Sick and Disabled Seamen" and created the U.S. Marine Hospital Service. The Commissioned Corps of what is now known as the U.S. Public Health Service was established by Congress in 1889. As America's health responders, the USPHS is an essential component of the largest public health program in the world and has been the frontline force in protecting citizens against disease and injury for more than 200 years.

At first open only to physicians, over the course of the twentieth century, the Corps expanded to include engineers, scientists, veterinarians, dentists, nurses,

pharmacists, physician assistants, environmental health specialists, and other scientists and health professionals. The role of the USPHS continued to expand through the twentieth century. As the century progressed, USPHS officers served their country by controlling the spread of smallpox and yellow fever, conducting important biomedical research, regulating the food and drug supply, providing healthcare to underserved groups, supplying medical assistance in the aftermath of disasters, and in numerous other ways.

The USPHS has a current active-duty force of about 6,600 officers with training in many areas, including medicine, engineering, epidemiology, industrial hygiene, toxicology, public health, and many other scientific and healthcare disciplines. USPHS officers serve in more than 80 countries around the world. In the U.S., they work in federal health, research, and regulatory agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the Indian Health Service, and the Coast Guard, and many more. As Uniformed Service personnel, USPHS officers are deployable on short notice to respond to public health emergencies including terrorist attacks and natural disasters. This “dual role” is unique among the Uniformed Services in that all USPHS officer have full-time “day jobs” in public health research or medical practice and also respond to national and international emergencies whenever and wherever they occur.

While there are some conditions of USPHS service that differ from the military services, officers of the USPHS Commissioned Corps are every bit as involved in protecting the national security as are our comrades in the Armed Forces. This has always been the case. The USPHS Commissioned Corps was "militarized" and brought under control of the Armed Forces during World War II and the Korean War. USPHS officers have served alongside their Armed Services comrades in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, onboard the USNS Mercy off the coast of Indonesia, and elsewhere in the world. Many USPHS officers are prior military officers who have transferred their commissions to serve in billets more relevant to their training in public health.

The Corps' response to natural and manmade health threats underscores the value to America of having a highly trained, multidisciplinary, and quickly mobilized cadre of health and medical professionals. Today, perhaps more so than ever before, with the threat of pandemics (e.g., Covid, Ebola, influenza, etc.), natural disasters (e.g., Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, Deepwater Horizon and Exxon/Valdez oils spills, etc.), and bioterrorism (e.g., anthrax, ricin, etc.), USPHS officers are on the frontline protecting the most fundamental element of national security--public health.

Conclusion

HB 126 would help maintain a strong USPHS presence in Ohio. Active duty USPHS officers work in a variety of assignments ranging from providing medical

care to Federal prisoners in Elkton, conducting research at the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and Environmental Protection Agency in Cincinnati, and augmenting mental health staff at Wright Patterson Medical Center in Fairborn. As of 2023, there are about 54 active duty USPHS in Ohio who would benefit from the passage of HB 126. USPHS and NOAA officers endure hardship and isolation by serving in some of the most remote areas of the world and with some of the most underserved populations in this country. Many deal on a daily basis with highly toxic agents, infectious diseases, injuries, and other dangers.

In conclusion, HB 126 would bring parity to USPHS and NOAA officers who serve and sacrifice much for their country, as do those who serve in the six Armed Services. Therefore, I respectfully request your support to pass HB 126. Thank you for your time, attention, and consideration.