



May 9, 2023

## Ohio Department of Veterans Services Budget Testimony (FY 2024-25) Ohio Senate General Government Committee May 9, 2023

Chairman Rulli, Ranking Member DeMora, and members of the Ohio Senate General Government Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to detail the Ohio Department of Veterans Services' FY 2024-25 Biennial Budget request and our related services and strategies.

I'm Debbie Ashenhurst. In 2015, I retired as a major general from the Army after 37 years of service and since January 2019, I have served as Director of Veterans Services. While we aim to improve our reach and impact in many areas, some aspects of ODVS remain constant. One of them, of course, is our steadfast mission to provide opportunities and resources for our veteran community through advocacy, collaboration, and partnerships. That does not waver. Our mission is to be the Trusted Voice for Veterans.

Ohio is a state of patriots. More than 730,000 Ohioans have served. With the commitment of the Ohio legislature, we have been able to provide comfort and care, opportunities and resources to these brave men and women and their loved ones. We "serve those who served."

We continue to administer the Ohio Veterans Bonus, which was approved by Ohio voters in 2008. We work with other state agencies, veterans organizations, and leading nonprofit entities concerning veterans programs and support for military members. We maintain and manage more than 4 million veterans' records dating back to the War of 1812.

Our mission has grown as times have changed. We manage the State Approving Agency, a federally funded program that supports veterans using their GI Bill benefits. There are more than 765 approved Ohio institutions where veterans and their dependents are able to use their GI Bill educational benefits. The State Approving Agency (SAA), housed within ODVS, safeguards quality education and training programs for all veterans and their dependents. The SAA completed 166 new and revised approvals totaling 4,027 total programs across the state in the last year. Those approvals keep over 19,500 GI Bill recipients in approved programs and brings more than

*"The Trusted Voice for Veterans"*

\$45 million into the state via tuition alone with millions more in fees and housing allowances each year.

We also have put more time and resources into our Veterans Workforce Team, which is bridging gaps across Ohio for employers who wish to identify, hire and keep former service members. In FY 22-23, our team engaged with more than 1,400 employers and offered trainings on how to hire and retain veteran employees.

Our staff has led key activities in support of behavioral health and suicide prevention, including leading Ohio's participation in the Governor's Challenge to prevent suicide among veterans, service members, and their families. We also have participated in the development and implementation of Ohio's first State Plan for Suicide Prevention to help build "veteran-informed" behavioral health and crisis services into the plan for the veteran and military community. Through this budget, we will remain engaged with the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services' efforts to help military and first responders with post-traumatic stress.

We will partner with the Department of Education in a new initiative, the Ohio Military Veteran Educator Program. This joint endeavor will support veterans and their spouses as they enter the teaching profession or work in Ohio's public schools. In partnership with the Department of Education, the program will support enrollment of veterans in educator preparation programs, cover the cost for veterans to obtain an alternative military educator license, fund efforts to recruit veterans in both teaching and non-teaching roles, and provide financial incentives to public schools that hire veterans. The executive budget also creates the Governor's Ohio Military Veteran Educators Fellowship Pilot program to recruit and place veterans in low-performing public schools.

In addition, Ohio law charges the Department with the responsibility to partner with county veteran service commissions and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in order to best connect veterans to the benefits and resources they have earned. This collaborative effort with our county veteran service offices helped Ohioans draw down billions in federal funds that are spent across all of Ohio.

While we perform these essential duties for Ohio Veterans and all of our communities, our largest responsibility is to those Veterans who reside in the Ohio Veterans Homes (OVH).

In 1886, the citizens of Ohio petitioned the state legislature to establish a home for Ohio's honorably discharged Civil War veterans who, due to diseases, wounds or other causes, were unable to earn a living. On Nov. 19, 1888, the first 17 veterans were admitted to the Ohio Soldiers and Sailors Home in Sandusky, known today as the Ohio Veterans Home. Since that facility opened, more than 50,000 veterans have lived there, and in 2003, the state's mission expanded with the opening of the Georgetown Veterans Home in southern Ohio.

Together, the Sandusky and Georgetown Homes fulfill a grateful state's promise to its sick, injured and aging veterans. The Veterans Home in Sandusky is not just a long-term care facility, though.

It is also home for up to 200-plus veterans to live in the domiciliary, an option for those who don't require round-the-clock skilled nursing care. The facilities in Sandusky sit on 99 acres in Erie County and make up one of the largest nursing home facilities in the country.

In 135 years, the challenges behind the mission to care for those who have served have changed enormously, but we have always worked to meet those challenges. Now is the time to confront one of those issues.

Under Governor DeWine's leadership, we worked with the Ohio Facilities Construction Commission and industry experts to evaluate the needs of Ohio veterans now and into the future, and to explore opportunities to meet those needs.

Their needs can be complex. Some of our veterans had lives very much like ours, or those of our friends. They returned from military service, got jobs, raised families, and were valued members of their communities. Some suffer from physical or mental injuries as a result of their service. Providing appropriate care for all of these men and women is a rewarding yet challenging honor. Our review of the existing homes identified where we must focus our efforts in the future. Our current facilities in Sandusky were built more than a century ago. They are built with dual occupancy rooms, group showers, and bathroom facilities, and have aging heating and cooling, electrical, and plumbing systems. Upgrades and modernization are required for continued use.

COVID has increased the urgency to make these changes. Ohio is only one of the 50 states and three territories that operate state veterans homes, and many struggled to cope with the dangers infection poses in a healthcare facility. Many states saw deaths skyrocket in their veterans homes. In Ohio, we made dramatic changes to protect our veterans. We set aside sections in our veterans homes to isolate residents who were sick or had been exposed to COVID. We eliminated many outside sources of infection, including volunteers, and appropriately limited visitation. We paused admissions. As a result of these efforts, we were able to minimize resident harm, although the strain on our operations and our veterans was still significant.

As you know, the Ohio Veterans Homes do not operate solely on funds provided by Ohio. Each home receives support from the federal government based on the size of our census and from the veterans themselves, determined by their ability to pay.

The Governor's leadership and vision with the Ohio Veterans Home is yet another example of his commitment to Ohio veterans and another way in which he is proving that now is Ohio's time. It is time for the Ohio Veterans Home to take a step into the future, and I hope you agree.

Our budget proposal includes a request for \$65 million to improve and modernize our existing facilities. If approved, we intend to apply for a federal grant for \$120 million, using the \$65 million as required state matching funds. This project will transform the existing campuses, allowing us to move veterans from cramped rooms, group showers and joint bathroom facilities with outdated heating, cooling, electrical, and plumbing systems, and into modern facilities where we can

provide for the health and safety of our veterans for the rest of their lives. These funds, if approved, will help Ohio keep a promise we have made to all of our veterans since the Civil War.

This funding method is further explained in the addendum attached to this testimony. We have initiated conversations and the appropriate grant paperwork with the Veterans Administration to ensure that if these funds are included in the approved budget, DVS will be able to leverage them with the federal dollars on the desired timeline.

These funds are necessary as we plan for what our future residents will need at the Ohio Veterans Home. This budget, of course, also continues to support the current residents and their needs as we provide the highest quality care possible to our veterans. As stated earlier, through this budget we will continue to partner with the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services across the state, and in our domiciliary at Sandusky for those veterans who are in need of some support, but not full-time nursing home care.

Beginning in December 2020, DVS initiated collaborations for an opportunity to participate with MHA on the Ohio State Opioid Response (SOR) grant. The SOR grant supports a culture shift toward veterans and their families in achieving long-term recovery and also to work across systems to aid in policies that are trauma and recovery informed. The strategy of a multi-system service, using best-practice approaches, will be instituted to ensure veterans are able to engage in programs for long-term reduction of opioid overdose mortality, stimulant use, opioid use, and co-occurring disorders. This strategy also will include a Certified Peer Recovery Supporter (PRS) training program for implementation of evidence-based services. You can find further explanation of this program in one of the addendums attached to this testimony.

As we look to the future, the Department of Veterans Services must initiate steps to close out an existing program of gratitude. The Department administers the Ohio Veterans Bonus, which was approved by Ohio voters via a constitutional amendment in 2008. Through this program, returning members of the armed forces are thanked for their service with a monetary payment. In accordance with the amendment, payments under the program come to a close three years after the end of the war. With the final withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan, it is now time to sunset the program and ensure those that served during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are compensated, as the constitutional amendment envisioned.

The original constitutional amendment called for up to \$200 million in bonds to be sold to cover the cost of the payments and administration of the program. Over the course of the program, \$83 million worth of bonds were sold and distributed, but now the fund is nearly expended. The authority to sell those bonds lapsed in 2013 and with a three-year constitutionally imposed timeline to close out the program following the end of the war, we must act now.

The Governor's budget allocates \$4.7 million in each fiscal year to cover current outstanding applications and the anticipated increase in applicants as we broadcast the final chance to apply

for these funds. This \$9.5 million over two years is an estimate based on Department of Defense deployment numbers and the number of applicants and payouts to Ohioans thus far. It also takes into account previously denied applications which can be easily corrected by veterans in the coming years.

The Department of Veteran Services plans on an aggressive outreach campaign to ensure every service member eligible for this bonus has the opportunity to receive Ohio's gesture of thanks for their service.

As stated, the Department of Veteran Services will remain steadfast in its many other missions to improve veterans' lives. We know our veterans enhance our communities and make meaningful contributions to our great state. Making Ohio the most veteran-friendly state in the nation is not just good for veterans, it is good for Ohio.

I thank you all so much for your support of Ohio's veterans and their families.