

**Kristina Roegner**

State Senator

27<sup>th</sup> Senate District



## **Sponsor Testimony**

Senate Bill 225

Ohio Senate Veterans and Public Safety Committee

April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2024

Chair Johnson, Vice-Chair Wilson, Ranking Member Craig, and Members of the Senate Veterans and Public Safety Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on Senate Bill 225. Senate Bill 225 seeks to designate September 22<sup>nd</sup> of each year “Veterans Suicide Awareness and Prevention Day.”

Freedom is not free. Brave men and women in each generation have stepped up to serve in our nation’s armed forces and many have paid with their lives. Furthermore, rates of suicide amongst veterans has been at crisis levels in recent years. Each day, 16-22 veterans are taking their own lives in our country.<sup>1,2</sup> This heartbreaking loss of life due to veteran suicide, (44 per 100,000) far outpaces the rate of suicide among non-veteran adults living in Ohio (19 per 100,000). Suicide rates among non-veteran adults living in Ohio increased 21% from 2010-2019, with the veteran’s increase more than double that at 49% during the same time period.<sup>3</sup>

With the rate of suicide among veterans startlingly high and increasing in recent years, we must increase prevention efforts. Recent prevention efforts being undertaken in Ohio include;

- Record funding for the 988 Suicide Hotline and surrounding awareness campaign in the most recent budget (HB33, 135<sup>th</sup> GA).<sup>4</sup>
- \$18 million in the FY20-21 state operating budget (HB 166, 133<sup>rd</sup> GA) for mass media and hyperlocal stigma reduction and awareness campaigns.<sup>5</sup>
- The implementation of a number of recommendations from the 2020 Suicide Prevention Plan for Ohio by the Department of Veterans Services and the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services.<sup>5</sup>

This legislation builds upon the work done in 2019, which enacted Section 5.481 of the Ohio Revised Code to designate the first Saturday of May as “Veterans Suicide Awareness Day”. This update is needed for two reasons – To recognize the importance of not only awareness, but also prevention; and to align the date to coincide with the nationally recognized suicide prevention month – September.<sup>6</sup> The idea for this change was brought to me by a constituent, Tim Hauser, who is a Gulf War Veteran and advocate for veterans in our communities. Tim has championed a number of initiatives in the veterans’ space over the years, including the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxins Act or PACT Act, which expanded VA health care for veterans exposed to burn pits, Agent Orange, and other toxic substances during their service.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2022/2022-National-Veteran-Suicide-Prevention-Annual-Report-FINAL-508.pdf>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2020/2020-National-Veteran-Suicide-Prevention-Annual-Report-11-2020-508.pdf>

<sup>3</sup><https://www.lsc.ohio.gov/assets/organizations/legislative-service-commission/monthly-agency-reports/agency-reports/files/mar-141-ohio-veteran-suicide-report-2020.pdf>

<sup>4</sup><https://www.lsc.ohio.gov/assets/legislation/135/hb33/en0/files/hb33-comparison-document-as-enacted-135th-general-assembly.pdf>

<sup>5</sup><https://www.lsc.ohio.gov/assets/organizations/legislative-service-commission/monthly-agency-reports/agency-reports/files/mar-141-ohio-veteran-suicide-report-2020.pdf>

<sup>6</sup><https://www.dvnf.org/september-suicide-prevention-month-spread-word/>

I thank this committee for your thoughtful consideration of SB 225 and I would be happy to answer any questions at this time.