

**Ohio Access to Justice Foundation
Public Testimony on House Sub Bill 96
Before the House Finance Committee**

Chair Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking member Sweeney, and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Substitute House Bill 96. My name is Angie Lloyd, and I am the Executive Director of the Ohio Access to Justice Foundation.

The Foundation is a statewide nonprofit organization that works to ensure that low-income and underserved Ohioans can fully and fairly participate in civil systems that produce just outcomes. To achieve this, the Foundation funds civil legal aid and access to justice initiatives across the state. The majority of the Foundation's funding is generated by the Interest on Lawyer Trust Accounts (IOLTA), Interest on Trust Accounts (IOTA), and a civil filing fee surcharge which are private dollars paid into the Legal Aid Fund and distributed by statutory formula. Since 2015, the Foundation has had the privilege of administering a small amount of general revenue funding specifically directed to addressing the civil legal needs of Ohio's veterans and of Ohio families struggling with substance use disorder. My testimony today focuses on the unexpected omission of that GRF funding from the Substitute Bill 96.

Ohio's veterans deserve both recognition and thanks for the personal sacrifices they make through their military service. Each and every one of us owes our veterans a debt of gratitude for their work to defend our great nation. Yet, upon return to civilian life, many veterans face financial hardships resulting from disabilities and other barriers that prevent stable employment. Many veterans also face physical and mental health challenges upon their return from service. Veterans often lack the resources and knowledge to navigate the legal system necessary to ensure that they can successfully access the veterans benefits that they earned through their service. Many don't know how to ensure that landlords accommodate their disabilities and still others need help sealing or expunging prior criminal records that may have resulted from prior substance use issues.

Since 2015, the Foundation has been appropriated general revenue funds to specifically direct civil legal services to Ohio's veterans to ensure that we meet our obligations to our vets to ensure that they can live their lives with dignity and respect. 77% of the IOLTA and filing fee dollars which pass through the Legal Aid Fund are statutorily directed to general civil legal services for all Ohioans. As a result, the Foundation has a limited amount of discretionary revenue available to direct to special populations like Ohio's veterans.

The \$2 million biennial appropriation originally included in HB 96 is integral to the Foundation being able to target specific funding to serve veterans.

Last year, Ohio's legal aids served **3,764** veterans throughout the state. That includes a Vietnam veteran who was exposed to Agent Orange while serving in the air force, but who was initially denied service-related veterans benefits because he served in Thailand. Thanks to a dedicated legal aid attorney, that air force veteran was able to prove that the U.S. military had, in fact, designated multiple air bases in Thailand, including the one at which he served, as having experienced Agent Orange exposure. As a result, his monthly benefits were increased due to his service-related exposure and he was awarded back pay in the amount of \$10,800. He now lives safely and stably on his own.

Derick Young, the Director of the Mahoning County Veterans Honor Court, noted that “legal aid has proven to be an invaluable resource for the veterans that we, the Honor Court, serve. Legal aids’ diligence and dedication in assisting our nation’s heroes in matters outside our court’s jurisdiction plays a vital role in helping restore honor to our veterans.” Dedicated general revenue funds to serve veterans are critical to the Foundation’s ability to focus on and serve this remarkable, special population.

The Foundation’s \$2 million biennial general revenue fund appropriation also included dedicated funding to serve Ohio families suffering with substance use disorders. Last year, Ohio’s legal aids served **4,710 Ohioans** struggling with substance use disorders.

The families who specifically benefit from this funding are usually grandparents who want to take custody of grandchildren when parents are unable to provide appropriate care due to substance use. Thanks to this general revenue funding, the Foundation has been able to direct civil legal services to those families working to keep their grandchildren out of state care and in loving and supportive homes.

These funds also support civil legal services to families trying to reestablish themselves after a parent successfully recovers from a substance use disorder and needs to seal or expunge a prior criminal record in order to get a job or a better job to be able to take better care of their family.

As noted previously, the Foundation has limited discretionary funding that it is able to direct to specifically serve special populations like veterans and families suffering with substance use disorder. Without legal aid to help grandparents and family members take custody of children whose parents are unable to care for them, the cost to the state in foster care and child protective services would be significantly increased. More importantly, children who could otherwise live with a loving and supportive family would be forced into state care.

I respectfully request that the Finance Committee restore the \$2M biennial appropriation to the Foundation for civil legal services for veterans and families suffering from substance use disorder.

The Foundation sincerely appreciates the work of this Committee on the budget and on meeting the needs of all Ohioans. Restoring this funding will help ensure the promise of our Pledge of Allegiance: justice for all.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Sub Bill 96. I’m happy to answer any questions.