



SAVE A WARRIOR®
WE CAME BACK FOR YOU

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Testimony of Suzette Heller

Director of Development, Save A Warrior

Before the Ohio House Finance Committee

April 2025 – 136th General Assembly

Chairman Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney, and Members of the House Finance Committee:

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Suzette Heller, and I serve as the Director of Development for **Save A Warrior**, headquartered in Hillsboro, Ohio. I'm here today with deep gratitude for the support you've already provided—and with a sincere and urgent request to reconsider the current allocation for Save A Warrior in the proposed state budget.

As it stands, the proposal is for **\$125,000 per year** for our program. I am respectfully submitting a **counter-offer of \$250,000 per year**, specifically dedicated to saving the lives of Ohio's First Responders.

Let me tell you why this matters:

In **2023**, we served **56 Ohio First Responders** at a cost of **\$280,000**. In addition, **24 Veterans who were also First Responders** came through our program—**80 total First Responders served** in that year alone.

In **2024**, we served **52 First Responders**, along with **40 who were also Veterans**, totaling **92 First Responders** at a cost of **\$260,000**.

Thankfully for Save A Warrior, the Disabled American Veterans Charitable Services Trust **grants our organization \$1M annually to help take care of our Veteran population**. Their name is proudly displayed on the National Center of Excellence for Complex Post-traumatic Stress at S/SG Dick Wood Warrior Village. That should tell you we are doing something right.

For the past two years, the **Ohio Association of Professional Fire Fighters** has provided \$62,000 annually from their member dues to support this work. We also received \$150,000 per year through a bi-annual grant from the **Ohio Department of Mental Health**. That support has been invaluable. But the **funding gap remains real**, and it is growing.

We are not a nice-to-have line item in the budget—we are a **life-saving intervention**. What differentiates our program is this:

To date, we have not lost a single Ohio First Responder to suicide who has come through Save A Warrior.

Let me say that again: **We haven't lost one.**

Law enforcement and firefighters are more likely to die by suicide than in the line of duty and the traditional medical model is failing them. The men and women who come to us, the majority, are **actively suicidal** and they cannot speak up. They fear losing their badge, their gun, their livelihood—and the shame of having to explain that to their family.

Our First Responders often work grueling 8 to 24-hour shifts. When a critical incident occurs—especially early in a shift—they are expected to push through the remaining hours with composure and professionalism, all while suppressing the emotional impact of what just happened. There's no time to pause, no space to process. In some cases, the responder may even be isolated from their team due to the nature of the incident, which only deepens the anxiety and disconnection they feel.

At Save A Warrior, we teach a new way of being—a radically different way to live. Our program gives First Responders **access to a world they never thought possible**: one where transformation is not only possible, but sustainable. A transformed human being can learn to recognize a traumatic incident, name it for what it is, and release it—rather than carrying it silently and indefinitely. With this new way of seeing and listening, moments of isolation are no longer sources of panic. Instead of anxiety, they may find stillness. Instead of fear, they may turn to meditation. And from that space, healing begins.

First Responders are held to a higher standard both **on and off duty**. They can't fall apart at the grocery store. They can't ask for help at work. So, they come to us—quietly, confidentially, and often as a last resort.

And when they leave us? **Suicide is off the table.**

Chairman Stewart and members of this committee—we are not asking for the moon. We are asking for \$250,000 per year—**less than the cost of one average line item in a single agency budget**—to save the lives of the very people who save ours.

We understand that difficult choices must be made. But surely, somewhere in this budget, **a less critical line item can be trimmed**. We're not talking about studying rabbit mating habits here. We're talking about First Responders who are out of options—and whose lives are on the line.



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The **National Center of Excellence** stands proudly in the great state of Ohio. It is right here. These are **our people**. They deserve better. They **need** better. And we have a chance to give them that—right now.

I have attached to this testimony **anonymous first-hand accounts from First Responders** who have come through our program. I encourage you to read them. They speak more powerfully than I ever could.

This is a largely thankless profession. But this—**this funding**—is how we show appreciation. Not with words. Not with plaques. But with **action**.

Thank you for your time, your consideration, and your leadership.

I'm happy to take any questions.

Respectfully submitted,

Suzette Heller

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Words can never express my love and appreciation that I have for you and all the amazing things you have done. With your gratitude and selflessness, you saved my life and I can't ever repay you other than sharing my new found love. I never knew the true meaning of love until I attended SAW on that most beautiful property in southwest Ohio and it all started with you. Your love. I have two twin boys that are 3 and a half years old and I vow to make that hour trip with them to let them know that's where daddy was saved and all because of selfless love from another. And for that I will be forever great full. Thank you a million times over and one more time after that

Love,

Patrick H.
Cohort 0722
SAW ALUMNI

This past weekend saved my life.

I have been on a collision course with self hatred and not caring if I was alive for most of my life. I overcompensated in focusing on others and thought that people would be better off if I was not around. I often thought, it's just death, everyone dies at some point. Why hang around for all of this dysfunction and pain. The thing that has kept me around is not wanting my adult children to see how much my life had spiralled out of control.

Today, I stand as a new person that I never thought was possible. I understand from deep within my soul that I am worthy. I also understand the amount of work that I need to do to continue forward with peace and happiness. I am excited, frightened, and overjoyed. I am my true self for the first time. This concept of holding myself accountable is one that I have tried often from a surface level. The difference this time: holding myself accountable is coming from deep within my being and I understand why I have failed and have support from my cohorts and shepherds moving forward.

Thank you for the part that you play in making SAW possible. I believe that you do know the impact that you are having on all of our lives and I hope that you also feel the gratitude deep down in your soul from all of us.

Much love and forever grateful for you and the SAW Village for guiding me toward a meaningful and fulfilling wholehearted life.

Galynn J.
Cohort 0275

Thank you for your extreme generosity. You have helped to save my life. My family and I will be forever grateful for this gift you have provided for us. It will never be forgotten. This experience has been the most profound and life changing thing I have ever been apart of. I have been looking for this guidance for years now. Thank you for making this all possible. You are truly changing and saving lives.



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Nick C.
Cohort 0274

Several months ago, I was convinced my time on this earth should come to an end. Thankfully, I got in touch with the right people and one of them asked if I was done suffering. They introduced me to Save a Warrior, and I immediately submitted my application. To say my experience at SAW was life-changing would be an understatement!

Thank you for your GENEROUS donation of the SAW property in Hillsboro, OH. It is absolutely beautiful and inspiring. Countless lives are being saved because of your property and the SAW program.

THANK YOU!!

Miles M.
#0271

My name is Mike L. and I just finished the longest, difficult, and yet most fulfilling 72 hours in my life. I'm 51 years old and I've met a lot of people in my life, but I can tell you that the men I met in the those 72 hours have turned my life upside down. These men have never met me, knew nothing about good or bad, or the kind of life I'd been living. And none of that mattered to them. They told me and all the other Cohorts they loved us before they ever met us. It's mind blowing to know that people like that exist in this life, because where I come from love is more transactional than unconditional. These men showed me that my childhood trauma and life struggles are not special to just me and for that I'll be forever grateful. And then they talk about this man, this man who doesn't know me from Adam and found it in his heart to donate property to Save-a-Warrior and help save the lives of people he doesn't know and will probably never meet is just unheard of these days. And for that Sir, I just want to say "THANK YOU!!!". You'll never truly know how much your kindness, generosity, and that beautiful piece of Mother Nature that you donated meant to this one man. Thank you for all that you have done and continue to do for all of the people you don't even know. You are a life saver!!!

Thank you,
Mike #0271

I am writing this letter to express my unlimited gratitude for the generous gesture you have given us all at SAW. This program has changed and shaped my life for the better and in a way that is unimaginable. Not only was I able to fully find myself but it also has saved my life. I was able to rediscover parts off my life that I did not even know existed. The land is beautiful and the facilities is unremarkable. From this day forward I am a better man and I owe it to you. Thank so much. I would not be here without you.

With much love and respect,

Zachary M
cohort 0269