

Vietnam Veterans of America Buckeye State Council testimony before the
Public Safety Committee Hearing on February 12, 2025.

Chairman Abrams, Vice Chair Miller, and Ranking Member Thomas, thank you for the opportunity to join you today and offer testimony regarding state funding for Vietnam Veterans of America, Buckeye State Council.

My name is Gene Wilt. I am First Vice President of Buckeye State Council, Vietnam Veterans of America. Buckeye State Council represents over 3700 members of Vietnam Veterans of America in Ohio, and advocate for all Ohio veterans.

Returning veterans from the war in Vietnam were debased by the general public; veterans groups ignored them, failing to assist them in their concerns regarding Agent Orange, PTSD, drugs, and unemployment. They responded out of necessity, by forming Vietnam Veterans of America, with our motto, *"Never again will one generation of veterans abandon another."*

Today, Vietnam Veterans of America has a national membership of over 92,000, including 1,500 women, with over 600 chapters throughout the United States, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Guam and the Philippines. VVA places great emphasis on coordinating its national activities and programs with the work of its state councils and local chapters and is organized to ensure that victories gained at the national level are implemented locally.

Vietnam Veterans of America worked for laws to assist veterans from Agent Orange exposure, holding thousands of seminars around the US. We forced the Mental Health community to recognize and treat PTSD.

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VVA successfully sued to provide Agent Orange benefits for the Ohio National Guard for C-123 aircraft and to restore Agent Orange benefits for the Blue Water Navy when those benefits were denied by the Veterans Administration.

At the state level, VVA's, Buckeye State Council (BSC) maintains an office in Columbus, with staff to assist Ohio veterans. BSC has provided emergency funding for veterans in areas suffering natural disasters, including hurricanes in Florida and North Carolina, and fires in Hawaii and California, through their respective VVA state councils. The citizens of East Palestine, Ohio received pallets of cleaning and emergency supplies from BSC after the derailment in their city of a train carrying dangerous chemicals.

In Cleveland BSC maintains an office for a full-time Veterans Service Officer (VSO) at the Cleveland Veterans Administration (VA) hospital. Our Service Officer assists veterans in submitting original claims to the Veterans Administration, as well as the handling of appeals for denied claims. This one-man office has recently been recognized as the highest rated in the nation. BSC is currently overseeing training for a new Service Officer who will be starting shortly for the Columbus area. Our VSO program costs for the upcoming year are about \$125,000.

Buckeye State Council collaborates with hospitalized veterans at the Chillicothe VA Hospital and has recently sponsored a disabled veteran participating in the National Wheelchair Games in New Orleans. We have also sponsored a local Little League baseball team.

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Ohio has thirty -five VVA chapters, including two chapters for incarcerated veterans. BSC provides special funding to our chapters for various chapter projects, including scholarship programs for children and grandchildren of veterans, newsletters, emergency veterans' assistance, and visits to veterans in nursing homes.

Additionally, BSC has provided 10' by 10' canopies with custom printed VVA logos for their use in meeting veterans in their areas to discuss the various VA benefits available, as well as introducing them to the availability of Veterans Service Offices in their respective counties.

BSC provides special grants to its chapters for their members who travel to our biennial national convention to conduct the business of the national organization, as well as VVA's Education and Leadership Conference, designed for chapter leadership training.

I want to take this time to thank you for your history of financial support and look forward to your continued financial support to BSC.

Thank you for the chance to address this Public Safety Committee Hearing.