

**Ohio House of Representatives
Public Safety Committee
Proponent Testimony for State Standing Budget Appropriations
for the Disabled American Veterans, Department of Ohio
February 12, 2025**

Committee Chair Abrams, Ranking Minority Member Thomas, Committee Members:

My name is Mike Stith. I serve as Adjutant of the Disabled American Veterans, the "DAV," Department of Ohio. Our membership consists of veterans who served during and were injured in time of war. We are one of the smaller Veterans Service Organizations but one of the most active. Thank you for allowing me to speak before the Committee.

Many of you know us, or know of us, from seeing our name and emblem on vans on Ohio's roads and highways. Those vans transport veterans to Veterans Administration (VA) hospitals and clinics for medical care, at no cost to those veterans. Since our last testimony, we have placed new hospital vans in service in Jefferson, Harrison, Pickaway, Ottawa, Huron, Crawford and Carroll counties. These include three 12-passenger, four 7-passenger and two T-350s with long wheelbase, high roofs and AWD. Those nine vans were purchased in part with State appropriated funds.

In addition to hospital transportation, our hospital volunteers assist patients at every major VA Medical Facility and at the Ohio two veterans' homes in Sandusky & Georgetown. Our assistance includes distribution of supplies and niceties purchased in part with funds from our State appropriation.

Providing those vans & coordinating those volunteers are just part of the DAV's mission, to help build better lives for our nation's disabled veterans & for their widows & orphans. For the last one hundred years, we have assisted veterans in these and other ways.

The DAV Department of Ohio is essential to DAV's mission. Through our State office, located on Chestnut Street here in Columbus, we coordinate various activities and services. We provide those services free of charge to all veterans, regardless of whether they are members of our organization. Feel free to stop at our office anytime. We are open and glad to explain our operations.

Veterans and their families know the DAV principally for guiding veterans through the complexities of preparing and prosecuting claims for service-connected disabilities (for disabling injuries incurred in service). We also assist with claims for non-service-connected assistance (provided to ill or incapacitated veterans in financial need) and for securing dependent indemnity compensation (provided to surviving dependents of seriously injured veterans).

Please allow me to speak of the benefits of working with the Ohio Department of Veterans Services (ODVS). By statute, DAV and other veteran service organizations (VSOs) comprise Ohio's Veterans Advisory Committee, which is run through ODVS. Through that Committee, the DAV keeps up to date on Ohio legislation affecting armed forces veterans and may suggest such legislation as well as work with ODVS on addressing veterans' issues. Recently, ODVS called me personally to discuss certain rules set forth by the Ohio Administrative Code. ODVS' responsibilities include selecting committee members from veterans service organizations to nominate candidates for Ohio's Veteran Hall of Fame.

ODVS arranges OVHOF and other veterans' ceremonies. Each county's Veterans Service Commission includes, by statute, a commissioner nominated by the respective county's DAV chapter. Veterans Service Commissioners benefit from training provided by ODVS and all County Veterans Service Officers are trained and certified by DAV. The DAV provided vans used for VA hospital transportation at the Ohio Veterans Homes. These are a few of the ways that DAV and others benefit from ODVS. Director Ashenhurst and the ODVS staff are hardworking, consummate professionals. We are fortunate to have Director Ashenhurst as our State cabinet representative.

Two years have passed since the DAV last provided testimony on the State appropriation. Since then, DAV's Cleveland Regional Office, which is funded through our national organization, served as representative in veterans' claims that obtained \$924,030,286 in FY 2023 and \$1,034,058,638 in FY 2024 for retroactive and first year service-connected disability compensation, Dependent Indemnity Compensation and non-service-connected veterans' Pension and Survivor Pension claims. Our Regional Office also assisted veterans during VA reviews of their existing service-connected disability claims so as to retain benefits. We assisted veterans in obtaining \$6,141,210 in FY 2023 and \$6,067,543 in FY 2024 in educational benefits and \$2,405,481 in FY 2023 and \$2,514,893 in FY 2024 clothing allowances. These are federal government benefits that are provided to and spent by your constituent Ohio veterans, to the betterment of the State's economy. These figures are provided by the US Department of Veterans Affairs, not by us.

We participate in providing those services through meetings throughout the State at which Chapter Service Officers (CSOs) provide local claims assistance. Also, at seven of Ohio's VA medical facilities, DAV Department Service Officers (DSOs) assist veterans with preparation and submission of service-connected disability claims and other benefit applications. The vast majority of our claims work is done by the DAV Cleveland Regional Office, with all CSO & DSO claims sent to that office for review and subsequent filing with the VA. Our Department Service Officers' wages are paid with State appropriation funds.

We recognize that county Veterans Service Commissions and other organizations do this same work, often naming the DAV as the veterans' representative for hearings. I cannot say how much or how many applications are directly attributable to DAV activities supported by the State appropriation. I can say that DAV's Cleveland Regional Office attributes 33% of its new claims volume directly to our DAV Ohio's CSOs and DSOs. Also, that DAV Ohio's CSO/DSO programs are DAV Ohio's greatest line-item expenditure, a status rivaled only by our expenditure in purchasing hospital vans.

DAV's activities include successfully petitioning the federal government for legislation recognizing injuries suffered during armed forces service, such as the maladies caused by Agent Orange exposure to Vietnam veterans and by exposure to radiation, or to toxins emitted by burn pits.

These and other of our services are beneficial to Ohio's veterans and to their dependents. In a different sense, our services are beneficial to the State at large, in that VA hospital care, service-connected disability claim compensation and VA benefits leave our veterans with funds to use for other purposes.

In summary, in the last two fiscal years, the DAV served as veterans' designated representatives in over \$2 billion of new, first time federal benefits to Ohio's veterans, your constituents, with much of that attributable to CSOs and DSOs funded by the State appropriation. The return on your investment through the State appropriation is immense!

Inflation has increased our expenses. Please continue to support a State appropriation for the Disabled American Veterans, as we continue to support our State's armed forces veterans, to their physical and mental betterment, and to their and the State's financial betterment. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak on this matter. It was an honor to do so.

Respectfully submitted,

Michael R. Stith

Adjutant, Disabled American Veterans, Department of Ohio
35 E. Chestnut Street, Room 503
Columbus, Ohio 43215-2590

phone: 614/ 221-3582

e-mail: mike.stith@ohiodav.org