OHIO JUSTICE & POLICY CENTER

215 EAST 9TH STREET
SUITE 601
CINCINNATI, OHIO 45202

341 S. THIRD STREET
SUITE 11
COLUMBUS, OH 43215

(T) 513-421-1108
(T) 614-362-1644
(F) 513-562-3200
contact@ohiojpc.org
www.ohiojpc.org

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
GABRIEL A. DAVIS
Attorney at Law

FOUNDER
ALPHONSE GERHARDSTEIN

Policy Director
MICHAELA HAHN BURRISS
Attorney at Law

To: **Veterans and Military Development Committee**
Fr: **Michaela Burriss, Policy Director**
Re: **Sub Senate Bill 179 Proponent Testimony**
Date: **Wednesday, March 18, 2026**

Good afternoon, Chair Richardson, Vice Chair Mathews, Ranking Member Lawson-Rowe, and members of the Veterans and Military Development Committee. Thank you for allowing me to testify on behalf of the Ohio Justice & Policy Center in support of Sub Senate Bill (Sub SB) 179, legislation concerning the veteran makeup within Ohio's prison population and how to accurately account for their presence and assist with their reentry upon release.

The Ohio Justice & Policy Center is a nonprofit law firm with offices in Cincinnati, Columbus, and Cleveland. Our mission is to promote fair, intelligent, and redemptive criminal justice systems. We fight for equal, compassionate justice and fair treatment of those who are incarcerated in all stages of their incarceration, because every person deserves dignity after their conviction and freedom after their sentence.

OJPC's policy reform agenda is transformative and rooted in our client-centered approach, including our flagship projects: **Beyond Guilt**, **Second Chance**, and **Human Rights in Prison**. This guides our work in and with the Ohio legislature, advocating for the abolition of inhumane practices — from shackling pregnant prisoners to capital punishment. We believe Sub SB 179 and the utilization of the Veteran Reentry Search Service (VRSS) is pragmatic because veterans represent both a significant and often overlooked portion of the incarcerated population, with opportunities to better support them both during incarceration and upon reentry.

Ohio has a very high incarceration rate and one in every three Ohio adults have a criminal record of some kind. The average prison stay is 2.73 years and 95% of state prisoners are released eventually, nearly 80% into parole supervision. Drug possession and Trafficking in Drugs are the top two offenses. An estimated 8% of the 2.2 million people incarcerated in jails and prisons in the United States are veterans, and an unknown number of veterans have had other types of contact with the criminal justice system. Veterans are twice as likely as nonveterans to face incarceration even though a significant portion of veterans in prison and jail received an honorable discharge.

The stated aim of Ohio's Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC) is to reduce recidivism and improve community safety, **focusing on rehabilitation through various programs and services** to help individuals become law-abiding members of society. This includes a safe, humane, and secure environment. By improving our identification of veterans across the justice system through Sub SB 179, allowing for more efficient and effective coordination with Veterans Justice Program Specialists, we can better connect justice-involved veterans with needed and available veteran-specific services.

It's challenging to provide a precise number of veterans in Ohio prisons who will benefit from Sub SB 179, but we can safely assume there are thousands in state care. During incarceration, most veterans are disconnected from their VA-funded health care and instead receive care through correctional facilities, care that may not be tailored to meet their needs. For example, veterans are more likely to experience conditions like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI). People with PTSD are more likely to have a substance use disorder and attempt suicide. TBI in veterans was associated with a 49% greater risk of rearrest, 85% greater risk of supervised release revocation, and 44% greater risk of reconviction. Veterans need our attention and help.

Incarceration in Ohio is costly at over $44,000 a year per person and our prisons are overcrowded, sometimes exceeding 130% capacity. Community-based treatments work for veterans. They lead to a decline in arrests, and yield positive outcomes, including increased productivity, fewer suicides, and lower incarceration rates. Sub SB 179 specifies that veterans' outreach programs from a county veterans service commission may include financial assistance to a veteran's treatment court to establish and fulfill an outreach program and the hiring and compensation of a person who will work at a veterans' treatment court to assist the court with an outreach program. These specialized dockets help veterans suffering from substance abuse or mental health issues with early intervention and treatment, enhancing public safety, preventing recidivism, and safely reducing the overall prison population. This is a tremendous benefit to all those within the system.

Because most people are eventually released and reenter society, our greatest return on taxpayer investment, both for the impacted individuals and our communities, is restorative incarceration. By passing Sub SB 179 we are creating a more just and fair reentry experience for Ohio's veterans, and by extension a more rehabilitative and safer Ohio. Chair Richardson, Vice Chair Mathews, Ranking Member Lawson-Rowe, and members of the Veterans and Military Development Committee, thank you again for allowing me to present the Ohio Justice & Policy Center's strong support for Sub SB 179. I would be glad to answer any questions.