



# Ohio State Association of County Veterans Service Officers

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## **TESTIMONY OF WADE HUFFMAN FOR OHIO STATE ASSOCIATION OF COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICERS**

Chairman Roemer, Vice Chairman Thomas, Ranking Member Troy & Members of the Ways & Means Committee

My name is Wade Huffman, and I represent the Ohio State Association of County Veterans Service Officers.

We have worked with our legislative representatives on other legislation in the past as well as the Ohio Department of Veterans Services, and to improve veterans' services throughout the State and on many other issues to assist veterans and their families. For many years, the funding mechanism for Ohio's county veterans service commissions has remained intact. That funding, through the formula established in Ohio Revised Code Section 5901.11, has benefited veterans and their communities, not just through much needed and well-deserved assistance and services, but also through the injection of federal dollars to each county to the tune of more than \$8.5 Billion Dollars as of 2023, equating to an almost 1000% return for each dollar spent: That's \$100.00 for every \$1.00 spent by each county.

Not many county agencies bring in federal dollars to the levels that veterans service commissions do. While we don't oppose legislation that's going to benefit any community, we must speak out against such a massive overhaul of the property tax system, which would seriously interfere with the services we currently deliver under ORC Chapter 5901.

House Bill 335 will have serious consequences for all eighty-eight county veterans service commissions. The elimination of local government authority to levy inside millage would wipe out the funding for county veterans service commissions. In 2024, the full millage available to Ohio's veterans service commissions totaled more than \$177 Million Dollars. As evidence of the veterans service commissions' serious understanding of their special fiduciary duty to their taxpayers, they only requested about \$111 Million Dollars, and as even more evidence of their



frugality, only spent just over \$90 Million Dollars. Where will Ohio's counties separately find \$90 Million Dollars to care for their veterans? And their surviving spouses and children? How drastically will this affect the \$8.5 Billion Dollars brought into the state? How will the loss of the services veterans service commissions provide increase the drain on other state and local services? These are merely a few of the consequences that will follow should the inside millage be removed as our funding mechanism. What other unknown consequences may follow?

We respectfully ask if the sponsors of this legislation have addressed, or even considered, all the possible consequences for not only our veterans, but also our schools, sheriffs, townships, cities, police, fire, and other public servants. While we understand and even concede our tax structure needs reform, and the Supreme Court said as much, three times, the first being more than four decades ago, any reform should be well-balanced, reasonable and intelligent, and only after all stakeholders have had an opportunity to participate and be heard.

Losing this funding would immediately require us to reconsider every facet of our operations, if we even still exist! For example, when VA benefits for disabled veterans can't be obtained because of inefficiency on the federal VA level, county veterans service commissions have been the only way many veterans, their dependents and spouses, get those benefits. It is well known to the VA and within the veteran community that more claims get granted when a professional highly trained Veteran Service Officer helps prepare a veteran's claim, and they get granted at a higher, more appropriate level of disability. There would be a cumulative effect from the federal dollars which would not come into the counties because VA benefits are lost. This does not even begin to cover all the outreach services we provide that would be gone, and our veterans would be abandoned, left to federal red tape for not only their claims work, but with medical issues as well.

This is not unique to county veterans service commissions. Schools, townships, villages, and cities would also be affected, impacting vital services like police, fire, and emergency response. This legislation would alter the funding structure that supports the backbone of our communities.

We want to be clear that we support responsible tax relief for our citizens. We understand how property re-evaluations have placed pressure on homeowners, especially those on fixed incomes. However, relief should not come at the cost of undermining services and assistance to veterans and their dependents.

Seventeen dollars and fifty cents. That's the full millage available to a county veterans service commission per \$100,000 of market value on a home. The average and median values of homes in Ohio are roughly the same, about \$231,000 in 2024. That equates to just over \$40 in real property tax slated for veterans services; \$20 each half year. As mentioned, however, veterans service commissions didn't request all possible millage on a statewide basis. And in fact, they only spent 51% of the total millage available to them. Therefore, of the thousands of dollars the citizens of Ohio are paying twice a year in property tax, on average they are, in reality, only paying \$21 per year to help our veterans, and their widows and children. We submit this is a small cost we bear in helping those that have secured our freedom and protect our way of life.

Ohio has a long history in honoring our veterans, and a system that is often the envy of other states, and their veterans. We should be doing more to help our veterans, not less.

On June 12<sup>th</sup> the County Auditors Association of Ohio held a briefing in Willoughby, Ohio (Lake County). One presenter, Christopher Galloway, 2<sup>nd</sup> Vice President of the association and Lake County's Auditor, stated veterans service commissions budgets would be "wiped out" by this legislation. In fact, he and another auditor stated sales tax rates would need to approach 20% to make up for the losses suffered. HB 335 only authorizes a 1% sales tax increase, far less than what would be needed, and would cause its own dire consequences on citizens and businesses alike.

Moving forward with this reform without a sustainable plan will result in severe, significant, and lasting consequences, not only for county veterans service commissions and our veterans, but for public institutions across Ohio.

I appreciate your sincere consideration of our position and thank you for allowing me to present our testimony.

Thank you.



Wade Huffman

CVSO

President, OSACVSO