

Vice Chair Wilson, Ranking Member Weinstein, and members of the Senate Armed Services, Veterans Affairs and Public Safety Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony in support of Senate Bill 179.

My name is Alan Echt. For thirty years, I served as a commissioned officer in the United States Public Health Service, one of America's eight uniformed services. I retired at the rank of Captain in 2020, and I now volunteer as the legislative liaison for the Greater Cincinnati Chapter of the Military Officers Association of America.

According to a 2024 report by the National Council of State Legislatures, approximately "200,000 active-duty service members leave the armed forces each year, and while most transition successfully, many struggle with mental health and substance use disorders, the effects of traumatic brain injury, homelessness and criminality. Veterans who enter the criminal justice system confront a patchwork of interventions, but these programs are often inaccessible and vary substantially across jurisdictions."¹ The same report notes that, "at least 70,000 veterans are currently incarcerated in the United States. However, the total is likely much higher because many courts, law enforcement agencies, and correctional institutions lack a reliable and uniform process to identify and track veterans."

The Veteran Reentry Search Service (VRSS), a program already offered by the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) is a process that allows authorities to identify and track inmates using their military record. SB 179 would require Ohio's correctional institutions to utilize VA's VRSS to identify incarcerated veterans. Identifying and tracking incarcerated veterans as they proceed through the criminal justice system would enable Ohio to assist them when it comes time for them to reenter society.

As Senator Johnson testified earlier, "Plainly stated, once identified through VRSS, this bill requires our correctional institutions to verify the veteran's status and eligibility and assist the individual in contacting veteran related services such as the VA, their County Veteran Service Commission, veteran service organizations in their area, a representative of the Veterans Justice Outreach Program, and any other federal, state, or local resources that may be available for the veteran. In addition, the County Veteran Service Commissions will also be required to assist veteran treatment courts in establishing an outreach program."

SB 179 embodies the uniformed service creed of "no man left behind." Connecting these individuals who served our country with services once they have completed their sentences will no doubt reduce recidivism and help them succeed as rehabilitated citizens.

¹ <https://www.ncsl.org/military-and-veterans-affairs/justice-involved-veterans-honoring-service-and-advancing-public-safety>

Thank you for your time and consideration of this bill. I regret that I was unable to attend the hearing today to answer your questions.