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S.B. 179
(1_136_0546-6)
136th General Assembly

Fiscal Note & Local Impact Statement

[Click here for S.B. 179's Bill Analysis](#)

Version: In House Veterans and Military Development

Primary Sponsor: Sen. Johnson

Local Impact Statement Procedure Required: Yes

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Highlights

- The bill is not expected to create any additional work or costs for the Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (DRC). According to DRC the bill codifies its current practice, however certain rules and policies may need to be updated.
- Certain local correctional institutions may incur initial IT setup costs for Veteran's Reentry Search Service (VRSS) integration, potential training expenses if cost-free training is unavailable, and varying administrative workload that, for some institutions, may necessitate additional staffing.
- Any increase in operating costs, as outlined in the above bullet, would vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction and largely depend on current practices. Several surveyed local entities have indicated that their current practices largely align with the bill's requirements.

Detailed Analysis

The bill requires certain correctional institutions to implement a program to verify the veteran status of inmates or individuals facing incarceration.¹ The process requires an institution to: (1) register with the Veteran's Reentry Search Service (VRSS), operated by the U.S.

¹ "Incarcerating institution" means (1) each institution that is under the control of the Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, (2) each county, municipal, municipal-county, and multicounty correctional institution that has on its premises a jail, workhouse, minimum security jail, community-based correctional facility, or facility in which an individual serves a term of incarceration or a prison or jail term, and (3) the aforementioned institutions in cases where an individual is awaiting disposition, or is charged with a felony, a misdemeanor, or a traffic offense that is punishable by a term of incarceration.

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), (2) obtain specified personal information from each individual to determine if they are a veteran during the confinement booking process, (3) access the VRSS to verify or confirm an individual's veteran status within three days of each booking, except when that individual's status has already been verified by another incarcerating institution, (4) note the individual's status as a veteran on all appropriate records, (5) train staff to use the VRSS, and (6) obtain cost-free VA training, or secure non-VA trainers at their own expense. If one incarcerating institution has performed the VRSS search for an incarcerated individual, no other institution is required to repeat the process.

To implement this verification process, the Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (DRC) and other incarcerating institutions must adopt rules, including establishing the types of documents that verification status must be recorded.

The magnitude of workload and related costs of this verification process for impacted entities will vary, depending on the size of the population served, potential training costs, resource allocation, staffing needs, and individual entity implementation procedures and whether those procedures are already in practice.

With respect to training, according to the Ohio Department of Veterans Services (DVS), cost-free VRSS training is readily available through the Veteran Justice Outreach Program operating from each major VA facility. DVS is not aware of scheduling challenges such as prolonged wait times to schedule this training, which typically lasts a few hours. Additionally, the cost of this training, the use of the VRSS, and any necessary computer hardware or software may be covered, in whole or in part, by financial assistance from county veterans service commissions (VSCs).

Incarcerating institutions

DRC anticipates no additional work or costs, as the bill codifies their existing practices. There may be some minimal one-time costs to update certain rules and policies, however.

For jails that already engage in veteran status verification there should not be a significant fiscal impact. For those that will be required to modify their intake procedures, the Buckeye State Sheriffs' Association (BSSA) states that resource needs will correlate with jail size and intake volume. Larger jails with higher intakes will likely require more time and potentially additional personnel. Costs may also arise from adopting or updating policies and procedures.

Anecdotal information from a survey of sheriffs around the state indicate that several already appear to attempt to identify veterans in their custody. Franklin County, for instance, partners with the VRSS, reporting that after the initial IT setup, ongoing verification was not burdensome. Stark County also uses the VRSS and collaborates with local veterans service organizations. Delaware County has utilized the VRSS since 2017 and manages weekly data uploads with existing staff (the jail coordinator), reporting that each search takes only a few minutes to complete.

However, the administrative workload associated with a verification program will vary for jails that do not currently use the VRSS. Certain jails, like Summit County, foresee necessary updates to interface their Jail Management System (JMS) with the VRSS. The frequency of required verification will also influence the administrative workload. Regarding staffing, some jails anticipate that existing personnel can absorb the new verification responsibilities, while

others foresee needing additional staff, with estimated salary costs ranging from \$20,000 (part-time) to \$101,000 (full-time) annually, inclusive of benefits.

County and municipal jails may also incur costs for personnel training on veteran status verification and VRSS utilization.

Veterans service commissions

The bill permits VSCs to provide financial assistance to a veterans treatment court to establish and fulfill an outreach program, and may hire a person who will work at a veterans treatment court to assist the court with an outreach program. It also permits VSCs to provide financial assistance to incarcerating institutions to purchase the necessary computer hardware and software, and to compensate for the cost of training and use of the VRSS, if such purchase or compensation is not provided by that department.

This permissive authority would not impose new costs on counties but rather makes this spending explicitly allowable. Some counties likely already have local VSCs involved in these efforts.

Synopsis of Fiscal Effect Changes

The substitute bill (I_136_0546-6), as compared to the As Passed by the Senate version, eliminates the fiscal impact on courts by specifying that the bill's verification requirements apply only to an "incarcerating institution," a term defined in the substitute bill.

The substitute bill also modifies certain duties of incarcerating institutions, including removing the requirement for institutions to assist individuals identified as veterans in contacting veteran-related services (such as the Ohio Department of Veterans Services (DVS), veterans service commissions (VSCs), veteran service organizations, representatives of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) veterans justice outreach program, or community organizations) that may assist in applying for federal, state, or local veteran-related resources. The substitute bill further replaces requirements for institutions to determine the number of individuals necessary to perform verification duties, designate those individuals, and train them to use the Veteran's Reentry Search Service (VRSS). Instead, institutions are more broadly required to train staff to use the VRSS. The bill also creates an exception to the verification requirement when another incarcerating institution has already completed a verification for the same individual. These changes may reduce staffing demands and associated costs by minimizing duplicative verification activities.

Additionally, the substitute bill permits VSCs to provide financial assistance to incarcerating institutions for the purchase of computer hardware and software necessary to access and use the VRSS, as well as for training costs, if such expenses are not otherwise covered by that department. The extent to which this permissive authority will offset verification-related costs is uncertain and will depend on the degree to which individual VSCs elect to provide such assistance, which presumably would depend on their existing budgets.