



Ohio Department of Veterans Services Budget Testimony (FY 2022-23) Ohio Senate General Government Budget Committee April 20, 2021

Chairman Schaffer, Vice Chair Wilson, Ranking Member Craig, and members of the Ohio Senate General Government Budget Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to detail the Ohio Department of Veterans Services' FY 2022-23 Biennial Budget request and our related services and strategies.

I'm Debbie Ashenhurst. In 2015, I retired as a major general from the Army after 37 years of service and since January 2019, I have served as Director of Veterans Services. While we aim to improve our reach and impact in many areas, some aspects of ODVS remain constant. One of them, of course, is our steadfast mission to provide opportunities and resources for our veteran community through advocacy, collaboration and partnerships. That does not waver. Our mission is to be the Trusted Voice for Veterans.

Ohio is a state of patriots. Over 750,000 Ohioans have served. With the commitment of the Ohio legislature, we have been able to provide comfort and care, opportunities and resources to these brave men and women and their loved ones. We "serve those who served."

The Department of Veteran Services has faced tough times during the COVID-19 pandemic but our mission to serve has never changed. We continue to administer the Ohio Veterans Bonus, which was approved by Ohio voters in 2008. We work with other state agencies, veterans organizations and leading nonprofit entities concerning veterans programs and support for military members. We maintain and manage more than 4 million veterans' records dating back to the War of 1812.

Our mission has grown as times have changed. We manage the State Approving Agency, a federally funded program that supports veterans using their GI Bill benefits. There are more than 765 approved Ohio institutions where veterans and their dependents are able to use their GI Bill educational benefits. The State Approving Agency (SAA), housed within

"The Trusted Voice for Veterans"

ODVS, safeguards quality education and training programs for all veterans and their dependents. The SAA completed 407 new and revised approvals in FY 20 containing 11,068 program approval actions. Those approvals keep over 20,000 GI Bill recipients in approved programs and brings more than \$250 million into the state via tuition, fees and housing allowance each year.

We also have put more time and resources into our Veterans Workforce Team, which is bridging gaps across Ohio for employers who wish to identify, hire and keep former service members. In the tumultuous 2020 year, our team still managed to engage 576 employers and offered trainings on how to hire and retain veteran employees.

Our staff has led key activities in support of behavioral health and suicide prevention, including leading Ohio's participation in the 2020 Governor's Challenge to prevent suicide among veterans, service members, and their families. We also have participated in the development and implementation of Ohio's first State Plan for Suicide Prevention to help build "veteran-informed" behavioral health & crisis services for the veteran and military community into the plan.

In addition, Ohio law charges the Department with the responsibility to partner with county veteran service commissions and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in order to best connect veterans to the benefits and resources they have earned. This collaborative effort with our county veteran service offices helped Ohioans draw down billions in federal funds that are spent across all of Ohio.

While we perform these essential duties for Ohio Veterans and all of our communities, our largest responsibility is to those Veterans who reside in the Ohio Veterans Homes (OVH).

In 1886, the citizens of Ohio petitioned the state legislature to establish a home for Ohio's honorably discharged Civil War veterans who, due to diseases, wounds or other causes, were unable to earn a living. On Nov. 19, 1888, the first 17 veterans were admitted to the Ohio Soldiers and Sailors Home in Sandusky, known today as the Ohio Veterans Home. Since that facility opened, more than 50,000 veterans have lived there, and in 2003, the state's mission expanded with the opening of the Georgetown Veterans Home in southern Ohio.

Together, the Sandusky and Georgetown Homes fulfill a grateful state's promise to its sick, injured and aging veterans. The Veterans Home in Sandusky is not just a long-term care facility, though. It is also home for up to 200-plus veterans who live in the domiciliary, an option for those who don't require round-the-clock skilled nursing care.

The facility in Sandusky sits on 99 acres in Erie County and comprises one of the largest nursing home facilities in the country.

The onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the spring of 2020 caused a seismic shift in our operations. Under the leadership of Governor DeWine, we acted quickly, setting up protocols and procedures in February, well before we had any verified cases in either facility. We constructed Enhanced Care Units (ECUs) in both facilities in anticipation of the need to separate and quarantine infected veterans from healthy individuals to slow the spread. We reduced entry points from 76 to two to enable proper screening of everyone entering the building. We paused visitation and volunteer activities to reduce vectors of transmission. Our maintenance staff worked to ensure our airflow systems created the best movement of fresh air as possible and our ECU's maintained negative air pressure. We accomplished all of this before it was mandated and well before most facilities of our nature around the country.

Testing has been key in reducing our cases and preventing mass spread in the facility. We have invested heavily in both rapid antigen testing and PCR testing at both facilities. To date, we have carried out more than 40,000 tests on staff and residents.

While all these efforts certainly saved countless lives, COVID-19 is a terrible disease that has caused loss of life in our facilities. We have been fortunate to not lose any staff members during this time but have had to say goodbye to veterans who called Sandusky or Georgetown "home."

Communication and transparency have been a priority during these ever-changing times. We have taken a range of actions on these fronts to ensure proper and timely information is distributed to our staff, residents, and their families. We have produced daily reports via OhioVets.gov and Coronavirus.Ohio.gov on the status of the Homes' testing, positive cases, and recoveries of both residents and staff. We have weekly reporting to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention National Health Safety Network as well as regular required reporting to the Ohio Department of Health.

We have written COVID-19 "Updates" about three times per month and "From the Desk of the Superintendent" messages two times per month. We have initiated direct phone calls to families of residents; daily for COVID-positive veterans and weekly for all others. Starting in May 2020, weekly "One Call" automated updates are provided to families each Friday. That call provides a recorded update of the status at each Home. Similar to the "One Call," we established a COVID Hotline for families to call and ask questions and also provide the "One Call" summary.

Our reason for being is to “Serve Those Who Served.” Any decision that results in a reduction in our ability to fulfill this mission is not taken lightly. In late March 2020, we made the difficult decision to put new admissions to the Ohio Veterans Homes on hold. This decision was made with the goal of safeguarding the 600-plus veterans who were already living on the Sandusky campus, and the more than 150 who resided at the Georgetown campus. Although this was a tough decision, we are certain it saved lives as other facilities that opened up admissions or mass visitation saw unfortunate outcomes.

This decision created difficulty for families whose veterans need our care and want to live in these fantastic Homes. It has been a long 13 months not admitting new residents for our staff and veterans’ families and it was not an easy decision. It also created a fiscal burden on OVH operations.

Historically, the Homes have been funded by both state GRF dollars and federal VA per diem based on our census. Each of these two sources of funding were approximately 40% of our funding. With the lack of new admissions and residents passing away from COVID and from other causes, we have seen a decrease in per diem funding with the continued increased financial toll COVID has had on our facilities. Additionally, some of our residents, those who can afford it, are levied an assessment to live in the facility. Again, with no new residents and those lost, we have seen a decrease in this funding source as well.

There is promise of a better day at the Ohio Veterans Home and it is within reach. Through the efforts of Governor DeWine and his administration, the Ohio Veterans Homes were the first nursing homes to receive the vaccine. We had better than average vaccination rates than nursing facilities nationwide including a 95% rate among our residents and 56% rate among staff compared to a 78% rate and 40% rate, respectively, nationwide according to the CDC. Community spread is still high but showing signs of decreasing. Sufficient supplies and resources to safely care for new admissions is available as supply chains have caught back up to previous levels. We also have wide availability of testing supplies at both facilities. All of these components add up to create an environment where we are now implementing strict new admission protocols and allowing veterans to come to their new home, starting a slow rise in our census which, over the next 12 months, should help alleviate our challenging fiscal situation.

This will take time and that is why FY22 will be a difficult year for the Veterans Homes. In the Governor’s budget you will see an increase of funds in FY22 from FY21 in the GRF line item for the Ohio Veterans Home. This increase is to offset the 20% reduction all state agencies took due to decreased state revenues last year, and restores DVS to the original FY 21 budget amount. Our budget is essentially flat funded from FY21 with the

increase just to try and combat the massive loss in federal VA per diem. This federal loss will be offset slightly by GRF and some federal CARES dollars but in total our reduction as a department is 5.8% in FY22.

Through our staff's hard work, dedication, mindful spending, and of course, your support, we will continue to provide a safe and compassionate home for Ohio's heroes at both Sandusky and Georgetown as our state and nation heal. This valuable investment in Ohio's veteran community should make every taxpayer across the state proud knowing we are caring for those who selflessly wore the cloth of our nation.

Every dollar invested into the Homes goes toward serving those who served and fulfilling a state's promise to those infirmed, injured and aging heroes of Ohio. In short, it is imperative to fund this core mission at the requested levels as we look to keep open the doors to those veterans who need our help the most and continue to safeguard those who already call OVH their home.

We certainly faced difficult times at the Department and we aren't done fighting yet. We will continue to serve those who served all across the state as we look to emerge from this battle with COVID-19.

It is my privilege and honor to serve Ohio veterans and military families as well as Gov. DeWine. With your commitment, our department can look forward to being properly equipped to care for veterans at our state facilities, and to promote innovative education, workforce and healthcare initiatives that enrich veterans' lives and sustain Ohio's reputation as a national leader on veterans' issues.

Thank you for your time today and your consideration of the Ohio Department of Veterans Services biennial budget request. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.