

August 11, 2021

To: House Armed Services and Veterans Affairs Committee
134th General Assembly of the State of Ohio Regular Session 2021-2022

From: Theresa Bartlett LNHA, LPTA
5007 Scott Street Newton Falls, OH 44444

RE: Senate Bill 160

Thank you for the honor to testify in support of Senate Bill 160. I testify as both a mother of a disabled Veteran and as a 14 year Skilled Nursing Home Administrator for a VA Community Partner facility and can tell you I have both personally and professionally seen how difficult it can be for a Veteran to become aware of VA benefits they are entitled to receive. When my son was injured during his service time it took years to get his full benefits and he was lucky since he had become friends with a Trumbull County Service Commission officer who helped him. This process has improved greatly since then however the main problem now is educating Veterans that these benefits are out there.

As an Administrator running a VA contracted facility I counseled thousands of Veterans and their families who had no idea of benefits they might be entitled to receive. Many of these Veterans had no idea that the health problems they were experiencing might be related to their service time in the past and that they could possibly receive compensation pay as well as many other benefits because of it. To give you a couple of examples:

1. A Vietnam veteran who later in life develops diabetes and now needs insulin could be rated as high as 80% or more providing him / her with at least \$800 a month plus multiple other benefits.
2. A veteran who served and spent 30 consecutive days at Camp Lejeune between August 1, 1953 and December 31, 1987 and later gets diagnosed with cancer will obtain a 100% service connected rating and thousands of dollars a month plus other benefits.

This brings me to why we are here some of those "other benefits". Did you know?

1. All veterans may be eligible for free room and board at a SNF if they have a terminal condition and are hospice eligible. A Veteran would have to either private pay or apply for state Medicaid without knowing of this benefit. This benefit does not even require service connection just a visit to a local VA to see a VA physician.
2. All veterans are eligible for up to 30 days a year in a SNF for a respite stay to provide a break for a care giver and currently these stays are mainly paid under Medicaid. This benefit also does not require service connection just a VA physician approval.
3. All veterans can seek financial help called Aide and Attendance which would help pay for things like Assisted Living or Home Care for themselves or their spouse instead of applying for Medicaid waivers or having to pay out of pocket.

4. There are grants for adaptations to the Veteran's home such as ramps or bathroom remodels to help keep the veteran home instead of in a nursing home.
5. Veterans rated with a service connected disability of 70% or greater can stay at a contracted nursing home for free either short term or long term placement.

In 2018 I reached out to all 71 VA community partner facilities throughout the state and found that of the 41 counties that had a VA community partner facility 37 of those confirmed that veterans in their area were overall unaware of VA benefits for which they may be eligible. There are 22 VA recognized service organizations nationally to help Veterans apply for benefits and our great State of Ohio has a County VA Service Commission in each of our 88 counties but they can only help those that are made aware that they might be eligible for benefits even though at the time of the veterans discharge they were healthy.

In the last couple of years I attempted to speak to local Ombudsman who stated this issue is handled by a person in Akron. I had VA management from Wade Park come and speak to our local hospital discharge planners however most do not follow through because it takes longer to approach the VA and the hospitals want them out. I am aware of nursing homes who are not VA contracted facilities saying they have a "veteran" unit and only tell a Veteran about the possible benefits if they have no payer and need them out, I spoke with Home Health Agencies and Hospice Agencies who at times share the information but usually do not do so on admission of the service but rather when there is a desperate need to remove them from the home.

I understand the eligibility to receive veteran benefits from the VA can be a confusing maze and that the definition varies from the state definition versus the federal definition. In addition the federal definition changes regularly and has many variables such as discharge status, deployment status, purple heart and POW advantages so it is not the intention of this bill to make that determination of who is a "veteran" it is simply to get the veteran to a service organization that can guide and assist in that area. I have learned from experience that even if a veteran does not qualify the first time they may qualify when conditions or criteria changes. I have also learned that there are many other benefits that a veteran could qualify for when not eligible for others such as congressional ordered bonuses. In addition there are other groups that service organizations work with that could help veterans that do not qualify for assistance from the VA. It would be great if the system for veteran benefits was easy to maneuver but if it were we would not need legislation like this one.

As an administrator I look at the ROI of a project and this legislation is not only a huge win for Ohio's bravest it is fiscally responsible to Ohio taxpayers. The 2020 census indicates Ohio has at least 16% of its population 65 or older and a large portion of the state budget is spent on that population from the Passport Program to assisted living waivers to nursing homes. In order to obtain state assistance an Ohioan must be or spend down to get to a certain poverty level however with VA benefits this is not the case and for those veterans already in a poverty bracket VA benefits could mean a significant financial boost. While not all "veterans" will be eligible for benefits considering what is

spent annually on the elderly population out of our state budget even if 1% of savings occurred this could add up to be a huge benefit to the state. It is not that we do not want to care for our heroes it is that when a Ohioan serves our county they put their life on the line for all Americans not just Ohioans and it is only right that they receive all the benefits they earned from the greatest county in the world not just 1/50th of it.

Simply by mandating hospitals, assisted living facilities, home care agencies, hospice agencies, nursing homes and long term ombudsman who are in contact with veterans or their representatives seeking services to inform the veteran / representative that they may be eligible for benefits through the VA and providing them with information about seeking assistance to apply through a recognized Service Organizations such as the county's VA Service Commissions could mean additional assistance for our veterans and a significant savings for our state.

This legislation educates both veterans and families of veterans at a location where most of us utilize at some point in our lifetime a healthcare provider. We often do not seek healthcare services alone we are accompanied by a family member or someone close to us and often that person is the one who encourages us to seek additional services or benefits like VA benefits.

This legislation does not require much at all since the agencies involved already would be working with the veteran on services and the oversight is already set up though regulatory compliance surveys through the Ohio Department of Health.

Please help our brave Ohio Veterans by supporting Senate Bill 160 and providing them with the information they need to make their own choice on how to obtain coverage for healthcare they require.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Theresa D. Bartlett LNHA". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Theresa D. Bartlett LNHA