

Testimony of William A. Heitbrink
In Support of HB 29

Chair Hoagland, Vice Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the committee. I thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of HB 29.

My name is William A. Heitbrink and I have been a resident of the State of Ohio since 2009.

I am writing this testimony in support of HB 29 which allows a person who was discharged from the United States Public Health Service or the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to obtain an Ohio veterans identification card.

The USPHS Commissioned Corps consists of approximately 6,700 officers ranging in rank from ensign to vice admiral, including physicians, nurses, engineers, dentists, veterinarians, allied health professionals, environmental health specialists, pharmacists, dietitians, physical therapists, and scientists. Like members of the armed branches of the uniformed services, USPHS officers are often called upon to put their lives at risk in order to protect the safety and health of American citizens. For instance, Public Health Service Officers are frequently deployed to respond domestically and internationally to infectious disease threats like SARS, Ebola, Zika, and cholera, to name a few. Furthermore, Public Health Service Officers respond to national crises like hurricanes, biological attacks, floods, acts of terrorism and other national crises. Public Health Service Officers have served alongside Armed Services comrades in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Timor-Leste, onboard the USNS Mercy off the coast of Indonesia, and elsewhere around the world. In Ohio, Public Health Service Officers work at the CDC's National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Environmental Protection Agency, in Cincinnati; the Federal Correctional Institute in Elkton; at Wright-Patterson Medical Center in Fairborn; and at the 9th District Coast Guard Headquarters in Cleveland. Most recently, members of the USPHS Commissioned Corps have been called to serve our country's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, the USPHS has established medical stations to assist in COVID-19 response and serve in COVID-19 Clinical Strike Teams, which include officers from the variety of disciplines needed on the frontlines: physicians, nurses, pharmacists, case managers, mental health specialists, and leadership and support staff.

For their part, NOAA Commissioned officers receive the same Presidential Commissions and take the same oath of office as their counterparts in the Armed Forces. The rules of law applicable to the Armed forces under Title 10 of the United States Code for retirement and pay are applicable to NOAA Corps Officers. See 33USC3701. Their pay and benefits (including medical benefits under Tricare) are the same as the other Armed Forces and their uniformed promotion structure is the same as that of the United States Navy. They are subject to frequent transfers, serve extended periods at sea under hazardous conditions and operate a number of research aircraft including hurricane research aircraft, which penetrate hurricanes at low levels to provide critical data for hurricane warnings.

In short, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, I support HB 29 which would place NOAA and USPHS officers in parity with all Uniformed Services Veterans in terms of Veterans ID cards in Ohio. I appreciate the opportunity to submit this testimony and I hope you will favorably consider HB 29.

Very Respectfully,

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