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Written Opponent Testimony
Substitute House Bill 172
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Chairman Hoagland, Vice Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Thomas, and Members of the Veterans and Public Safety Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you in opposition to House Bill 172. The issue of fireworks and the unexpected noises and flashes that come with them are of real concern to me, personally, and many other veterans — particularly, combat veterans — who have returned from military service with post-traumatic stress. For many of us, the question of whether to legalize these more powerful fireworks is a matter of quality of life.

At a time when so much of daily life is on hold or turned on its head, I question the necessity for the legislature to push forward with HB 172 after so many experts — doctors, veterans, pet owners, insurance professionals, emergency responders, and many more — have testified about the dangers of 1.4g fireworks. In my profession and those of many of my colleagues who have testified, we are working hard every day to keep people safe and healthy while the pandemic ravages communities. **It is dismaying that this legislation should move forward at a time when it is still difficult to return to the Ohio Senate to speak to your committee.**

I served in the United States Air Force for seven years and, more recently, was president of the Ohio State Association of County Veterans Service Officers, which represents veterans in all 88 counties. I'm currently doing similar work at the national level. Much of my life after my military service has been dedicated to the betterment of the lives of Ohio's veterans in Hancock County, across the state, and now across the country.

Like many of the veterans I serve, I've had to deal with post-traumatic stress after my military service. I've been fortunate to have the comfort and presence of Tyson, my first service dog, and now Stevie Rae, who's training to be my second service dog. You may be surprised to know that rates of post-traumatic stress range from 12% of Persian Gulf veterans to 15% of Vietnam veterans to as high as 20% among post-9/11 veterans, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. **That equates to about 100,000 veterans in Ohio living every day with post-traumatic stress.**

A recent Virginia Tech study noted: "Fireworks on nights other than the Fourth of July or New Year's Eve might be nothing more than inconsiderate neighbors, but for veterans with PTSD, **the shock of noise and light may trigger a deeply-learned expectation of danger.**" For them,

“unexpected surprising events — noise or otherwise — could be a matter of life or death.”¹

With the veteran suicide rate as high as it is, why would we want to allow this unnecessary law change? In my daily interaction with combat veterans, it breaks my heart to watch them beat themselves up with the inner dialogue when they have panic attacks. That is exactly what fireworks at unexpected times can cause for veterans.

I am not alone in my concern about this legislation. The AMVETS Department of Ohio, which has 32,000 members in the state, previously testified against legalizing consumer-grade fireworks. And the American Legion national executive committee passed Resolution No. 33 in 2006 which reads in part: “Departments and Posts [should] encourage children and their families to enjoy fireworks at public fireworks displays conducted by professionals, rather than purchase fireworks for home or private use.”

Veterans love this country and enjoy celebrating it as much as anyone, but as with all revelry, there is a point when it becomes unnecessarily reckless. The type of fireworks HB 172 would legalize are an unpredictable and unwelcome factor — they would be one more thing we have to contend with as we try to live a normal life after our military service. And while I can plan to be home or somewhere else when I know the city puts on a fireworks show, I can’t anticipate neighbors setting them off. I rely on my service dog as a constant comfort by my side, and if my dog is startled or on edge because of fireworks, or God forbid if she runs off, that is unhealthy for me, too.

Chairman Hoagland, Vice Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the Senate Veterans and Public Safety Committee, thank you for receiving my testimony. I’ve dedicated my life after military service to helping veterans. Whether to legalize discharge of 1.4g fireworks may seem like a simple question, but I fear it could be deeply impactful to many Ohioans who are just trying to live normal, productive lives. Thank you.

¹ “Scientists find heightened attention to surprise in veterans with PTSD,” Virginia Tech Carilion Research Institute, <https://vtnews.vt.edu/articles/2018/01/vtc-ptsdlearning.html>