



State Representative Brian Stewart

State Representative Bernie Willis

Joint-Sponsor Testimony House Bill 69

March 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023

Chairman Loychik, Vice-Chair Demetriou, Ranking Member Miller, thank-you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony in favor of House Bill 69, which will require each county veterans' service commission to include two members who were in military service after September 11, 2001, and which will require one member of each county veterans' service commission to be appointed by the Board of County Commissioners.

The increase in military conflicts since September 11, 2001 has created a new generation of Post-9/11 veterans. These men and women make up a large portion of the veteran community here in Ohio, yet the process for determining which veterans are appointed to oversee millions of dollars of government benefits to the veteran community has not been meaningfully revised in more than 25 years. Veteran Service Commissions receive a mandated allocation of funding in each county, based on a percentage of the county's real property valuations. Statewide, more than \$90 million is budgeted to be spent by these local 5-member commissions, each having significant discretion as to how benefits for local veterans will be disbursed, and how the respective offices will be run.

Despite there being more than 20 years of military conflict after 9/11, today, just 12% of the Veteran Service Commission slots statewide are filled by a post-9/11 veteran. When I last surveyed my former district, just 2 in 30 slots (6%) were filled by a post-9/11 veteran. In some districts, the percentage is 0%. Some will claim that this is somehow just a function of age; that post 9/11 veterans are simply too young to have interest or time to serve on a VSC. I respectfully disagree. There are post 9/11 veterans ranging that are 60+ years of age, and numerous other post-9/11 veterans who are in their 40s and 50s. Ohio's post 9/11 veterans are more than qualified and ready to continue to serve.

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Chairman Loychik, Vice-Chair Demetriou, Ranking Member Miller, thank-you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony in favor of House Bill 69.

The current structure for Veterans Service Commissions base eligibility for appointment on which service organization a veteran belongs to without regard to the era of military conflict in which the veteran served. This was not always the case. In fact, prior to 1994, the Ohio Revised Code specifically required that one slot on the Veteran Service Commission be filled by a WWI veteran, and that one slot would be filled by a WWII veteran.

House Bill 69 will preserve the current right of Ohio's veteran service organizations to make recommendations for appointment to the Veteran Service Commissions, while simultaneously restoring a conflict-specific criteria to increase the number of post-9/11 veterans in these roles. Specifically, House Bill 69 will require at least 2 of the 5 slots on a county Veteran Service Commission to be filled by a post-9/11 veteran. Additionally, it would require each veteran service organization submitting recommendations for appointment to a Veteran Service Commission to include the name of at least 1 post-9/11 veteran in their list of recommendations.

Finally, it would grant the Board of County Commissioners the authority to appoint 1 of the 5 slots on the Veteran Service Commission rather than all 5 being appointed by a judge on the Court of Common Pleas. Making appointments to various county boards is a significant aspect of the job of a County Commissioner, and many commissioner boards have robust processes in place to solicit, vet, and make appointments that would be a benefit to appointing a single member of a VSC as well.

As a tenured Air Force Colonel myself, who like many of you, served in the post-9/11 era, I believe it is important that Ohio's VSC's more adequately include the voice of this generation of veterans in making crucial funding decisions which reflect Ohio's veteran population. 12% of the seats statewide – after 20 years – quite simply is not acceptable. We appreciate your consideration of House Bill 69, and we are happy to address any questions you may have.