

**Ohio House of Representatives
Armed Services & Veterans Affairs Committee**

**Opposition Testimony: House Bill 69
December 5, 2023**

Committee Chair Loychik, Vice Chair Demetriou, Ranking Minority Member Miller, Committee Members. Thank you for your service on the House Armed Services & Veterans Affairs Committee.

My name is Mike Stith. My military service was primarily with the 82nd Airborne Division. My testimony is provided as Adjutant and spokesperson of the Disabled American Veterans, the “DAV,” Department of Ohio. We are one of the smaller Veterans Service Organizations but one of the oldest and most active.

By unanimous vote of our State Executive Committee, DAV opposes House Bill 69. [See Minutes dated 04-25-23.] Thank you for this opportunity to explain our opposition.

Veterans Services Commissions (VSCs) are very important to the DAV. Many veterans rely on VSCs for help with U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (“VA”) paperwork as well as for financial assistance and hospital transportation. Ohio’s laws grant one DAV nominee to the VSC of each county.

On many issues, we stand on common ground with the proponents of HB 69. All of their testimony praises the knowledge, experience and abilities of post-9/11 veterans. We couldn’t agree more! They served our country as volunteers in times of need. We respect them and welcome them to serve as veterans service commissioners, by service organization nomination and judicial selection, as set forth under existing law. In fact, we already have welcomed them!

As stated by one HB 69 proponent [Mr. Kohler], post-9/11 veterans already hold 12% of the State’s VSC commissioner positions. As a proponent, he supports HB 69’s proposed two out of each five VSC commissioner seats for post-9/11 veterans. That’s 40%! Actually, that exceeds 40%, considering that post-9/11 veterans remain eligible for any of the three remaining seats per county.

Post 9/11 veteran populations within Ohio counties range from 9.3% to 19.1%. The maximum is less than half HB 69’s proposed ratio. The mean of the numbers, 14.2%, has nearly been achieved by the 12% number given above. In other words, **post-9/11 veterans already are represented in close proportion to their numbers**. Allow me to add that, with the passage of time, post-9/11 veterans will control all VSCs. All without this unnecessary and damaging legislation.

We say damaging legislation because Ohio has the best veterans’ service system in the Nation. This legislation seeks to change that. HB 69 would eliminate judicial selection of one or more of the five commissioners of each county’s VSCs while forcing out veterans of other eras.

HB 69 would **weaken an appointment process that has been praised as one of the best in the Nation**. An independent report, prepared at the request of the Ohio Department of Veterans Services, confirms the superiority and importance of Ohio’s judicial appointment of VSC commissioners. The Report’s purpose was to compare Ohio’s current VSC structure with successful models of other states, with a goal of improved quality. The Report found **Ohio’s judicial appointment process “provides an important judicial check to the county executive’s influence on the financial and personnel decisions of**

County Veterans Service Offices.” [Pages provided with DAV 5-27-2023 letter; full Report available on request.] HB 69 would replace that judicial check with political county commissioner appointments.

Also damaging, **HB 69’s appointment eligibility restrictions are counterproductive.** Past laws required VSC appointments of veterans of WW I & WW II eras, giving those VSCs the benefit of past knowledge & experience. **HB 69 does just the opposite, denying commissioner positions to those with past knowledge and experience.**

We believe that proponents of HB 69 have been misled. They ask you to increase their number of VSC commissioners far above their proportional numbers. When looked at realistically, the request doesn’t even make sense. Then they ask you to reduce commissioner knowledge and experience. HB 69 would change a great system that, in the future, will be all theirs. We seek to preserve that system, to hand over to them, for the good of all armed forces veterans of Ohio.

The most telling evidence of proponents having been misled is not in their testimony but instead is what their testimony does not mention. **Proponent testimony is devoid of any support, devoid of any mention of HB 69’s change of one or more judicial appointments to political appointments.** Their testimony does not include one word in support of county commissioner appointments.

There is a reason why that issue is not mentioned. It is easy to tell people that they have been wronged and should protect their interests. It is difficult to explain why they should ask for greater political control over judicially appointed boards. Their testimony asks you to right an alleged wrong that doesn’t exist. Their testimony does not ask, mention or support in any way county commissioner appointments.

For decades, the County Commissioner Association of Ohio has listed gain of control over VSC funds as one of its objectives. **If HB 69 passes, county commissioner appointees will gain partial control over VSC funds and hiring. Reduction of assistance to veterans in need and reduced hiring would increase the end-of-year money that reverts to the county commissioners who appoint them.**

This is a bad bill for veterans and a bad bill for Ohio. HB 69 would taint VSC assistance and personnel decisions with political influence while pretending to solve an appointment problem that does **not** exist.

For all of these reasons, Disabled American Veterans, Department of Ohio urges rejection of HB 69.

I am happy to answer any questions that you may have, now or after this session or anytime you call or visit. Our office is open to you and to all. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak. It was an honor to do so.

Respectfully submitted,

Disabled American Veterans, Department of Ohio

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