

Hancock County Veterans Service Commission

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Amended Opponent Testimony of Nichole Coleman
Ohio State Association of County Veterans Service Officers
HB 69
House Armed Services and Veterans Affairs Committee

Chairman Loychik, Vice Chair Demetriou, Ranking Member Miller, Representative Ghanbari, Representative Willis, Representative Richardson, Representative Gross, Representative Troy, Representative Brown, Representative Weinstein, Representative Kick, Representative Lampton and Representative Rogers: My name is Nichole Coleman and I am a seven-year Air Force veteran who served in Desert Storm and I am also the wife of a 10-year Air Force veteran. I am a county veterans service officer and the director of the Hancock County Veterans Service Office. Since I assumed this position in 2011, the office has more than tripled the number of veterans served locally, and the amount of VA expenditures for county veterans has increased by 11.5 million dollars with 1,100 fewer veteran residents. During my seven years in the U.S. Air Force, I provided security for the Electronic Security Command in Texas and Saudi Arabia during Desert Storm. I also provided public relations support and media coverage during Operation Joint Endeavor in Bosnia. In 2021, I was elected as the President of the National Association of County Veteran Service Officer. I served a three-year term on the Advisory Committee on Veterans' Employment, Training, and Employer Outreach for the U.S. Department of Labor. I am a past President for the Ohio State Association of County Veterans Service Officers. Under my leadership, four innovative programs were introduced in Hancock County to provide veteran wellness, additional recovery tools, and better quality of life. Battle Buddies is a peer support program and G.I. Tunes is a unique program designed to provide veterans the opportunity to engage in and explore how music listening can positively impact ongoing symptoms of PTSD and other mental wellness needs. I started a group at my church called Veterans Discovering New Life that I facilitate, where veterans are encouraged to stand strong together and grow in God's love. Guitars for Vets is a national program that was brought to Hancock County in 2019, where it is the first location to offer the program outside a VA facility.

While well intentioned, the implementation of House Bill 69 could bring further separation within the veteran ranks when we are working hard to bring them together and close that gap. If the post-9/11 veterans are going to be prioritized out then what about Desert Storm, Kosovo, Panama, Beirut, Lebanon, Grenada and peacetime? Should they also be provided with seats on the commission?

It is my opinion that the veterans service commissioners who are pre 9/11 may not have had the same experiences as veterans who have served, since we were attacked on American soil, that doesn't minimize their experience, service, insight or abilities. They stand for and with the post-9/11 veterans and are there to serve them.

Ranking Member Adam Miller addressed the Committee on March 7 (4:41) about collaboration, making Ohio the best state for veterans and their families to call home – a sentiment I wholeheartedly share.

Statistics were offered in favor of the legislation to the effect that only 12% of the seats are filled by post 9/11 veterans. I take issue with those statistics and concur with the numbers submitted by the Ohio State Association of County Veterans Services Officers, which were compiled from the records of the Ohio Department of Veterans Services.

Ref: H.B. 69 Testimony from Nichole Coleman

Post-9/11 veterans can be and are currently members of the veterans organizations which fill four seats on the veterans service commissions. There are many avenues for veterans service offices to helping posts recruit new members and, ultimately, commissioners.

Some witnesses have cited interpretations of previous versions of ORC Chapter 5901, however, the various amendments to the law over the years have broadened, not restricted, the appointment of more veterans from all eras of conflict. The language of HB 69 is unnecessary if the true intent of the sponsors is to enlarge the pool of veterans, because previous amendments removed most appointment categories for specific conflicts.

Historically, legislative efforts to change the funding mechanism under O.R.C. 5901 have generally been rejected because of the overriding principle of veterans serving veterans, and the concern of preserving veteran service commission autonomy.

We are opposed to the legislation as written. As responsible stewards of taxpayers' dollars we see this legislation as unnecessary legislation and potentially divisive for the veterans' community.

We appreciate the time and interest each of you have shown in ensuring our veterans are properly served, just as they have served our Nation.