

House Bill 69 Proponent testimony

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Chairman Loychik, Vice-Chair Demetriou, and Ranking Member Miller, thank you for providing the opportunity to present proponent testimony today on House Bill 69. My name is Steven Staniford an Ohio born 100% service-connected disabled Air Force Veteran of Operation Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom.

I have been fortunate enough to live all across this beautiful state. What that provided was a unique view of what different counties offered our Veterans in services and assistance. I have seen County Veteran Service Offices and Commissions help Veterans in their times of need, and unfortunately, I have seen them more often habitually fail them. This brings me to why I support House Bill 69 and why I'm asking you to support it as well.

Let's begin with the change House Bill 69 aims to implement – requiring one seat on the Veteran Service Commission to be awarded to a post-9/11 Veteran. I'm certain this commission is well aware of the issues affecting the Hamilton County VSO and VSC where I reside. The average age of the board is 72, mirroring the age of the executive director who has held the position for nearly 33 years.

I pose this question to the commission: how can a board chiefly consisting of individuals from a different era fully comprehend the needs of modern veterans dealing with Traumatic Brain Injuries, severe PTSD, and anxiety disorders? These conditions weren't discovered diagnosed or even treated properly until this recent era of conflict. Moreover, consider the servicewomen from the Gulf War and post-9/11 periods, where according to the VA 1 in 3 are recognized as military sexual trauma survivors. How can they look at the VSC or VSO Officers and believe they will receive the necessary assistance and understanding of their past experiences when they aren't represented?

House Bill 69 offers a necessary course correction. The stagnant strategies and outdated laws governing these vital services need an overhaul. The root of the problem is the current system, with its unchanging leadership, struggling to address the evolving needs of veterans. House Bill 69, for that reason alone, should be passed without delay.

I'd be remiss to stand here having this opportunity and not share with this commission something to chew on as they consider other legislative changes beneficial to post-9/11 Veterans. In my recent unexpected journey into Veteran advocacy, I've received calls, texts, and emails from numerous veterans; A common theme emerges. These veterans are underserved and under represented. Three

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out of the five board of commissioners' seats are under the control of bar organizations—indeed, strong ones, the VFW, American Legion, and Amvets face steadily declining memberships. Regrettably, I, like many others, didn't feel welcomed by these organizations upon my exit from the service. Consider that 1 in 10 veterans, a number doubling to 2 in 10 for those with PTSD, grapple with substance abuse; this structure renders three seats on the commission unattainable to a significant portion of veterans. This situation is unacceptable to me and the veterans I've spoken with, and honesty dictates it should be to you as well.

I'll leave you with this. In teaching me about compromise as a child, my father explained to me that sometimes it means everyone walks away a little unhappy. And while this bill is not perfect, I believe it's a compromise we can all agree upon. So I ask you, the Ohio Representatives get this to the floor, make it work. Please honor the sacrifices we have made for this great state and nation and get this bill passed. Thank you for allowing me to give testimony to you today