



## Department of Veterans Services

John R. Kasich, Governor  
Thomas N. Moe, Director

Chairman Widener and Ranking Member Skindell:

Good afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before this committee and speak about the Ohio Department of Veterans Services, also known as DVS.

As you may be aware, the Department was established with the signing of Senate Bill 289 in the 127<sup>th</sup> General Assembly and became a cabinet-level department on August 21, 2008.

The mission of DVS is to actively identify, connect with, and advocate for veterans and their families. The Department carries out this mission with the following programs:

- DVS conducts outreach to veterans and provides training and oversight to the 88 County Veterans Service offices.
- DVS coordinates programs and operations with the US Department of Veterans Affairs which provides benefits to our veterans.
- DVS administers the Ohio Veterans Bonus for veterans of the Persian Gulf War era and post-9/11 era conflicts, a program which is funded by bonds approved by Ohio voters.
- DVS operates the Ohio Veterans Homes in Sandusky and Georgetown which are open to Ohio-resident veterans who served in periods of armed conflicts.
- DVS hosts several veterans' ceremonies each year including the Governor's wreath-laying ceremony for Ohio's killed in action and the Ohio Veterans Hall of Fame.
- DVS manages two federal education-related programs: Troops to Teachers and the State Approving Agency.

To help us carry out these programs, we are given the custodianship of over 1.9 million veterans' records dating back to World War II.



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Senate Bill 289 defined the Department's mission and gave it the responsibility to work directly with the County Veterans Service Offices and the VA as well as with the various veterans service organizations, along with other concerned associations.

The reason for this charge is simple, and to us, it's a sacred trust – to obtain for veterans the benefits that they've earned by their service.

Our success in accomplishing this mission has implications well beyond the benefits or assistance provided to an individual veteran – it's an economic engine for our state. Most of the benefits received by veterans originate at the federal level with the VA — the US Department of Veterans Affairs--whether those benefits comprise compensation for injuries, health care, educational assistance, home loans or many of the others provided by the VA. In 2009, the VA spent nearly \$4.4 billion dollars in Ohio, dollars that directly benefited our veterans as well as our local communities and schools.

The VA estimates our veterans population in Ohio to be over 900,000. We're losing many veterans from the World War II and Korean War eras, but veterans from our current conflicts are taking their places every day. Oftentimes these veterans don't know that they qualify for certain benefits, even older veterans. Sometimes we need to explain to a veteran who injured his shoulder on an airborne jump 40 years ago and has since healed, that he or she could be eligible for compensation today if the injury developed into arthritis.

At the same time, today's younger veterans may be well aware of the educational benefits they can receive but have no knowledge that they're qualified for a low-cost home loan.

So we're committed to finding veterans, and then connecting them to their benefits. But how is that connection made? It takes place at the veterans service office in each county. This is a local entity controlled by the local veterans service commission whose members are nominated by veterans service organizations and appointed by a county common pleas



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judge. The county veterans service offices help veterans apply for the benefits they've earned and also provide them with direct financial assistance when necessary. Historically, veterans receive about 40 percent more of the federal benefits they've earned when they get help in applying for them.

How are we doing today? We've made big strides in two-plus years as a department, and we're focused on taking even larger steps. As one example, a study published in 2006 by the Institute for Defense Analysis said that Ohio was 50<sup>th</sup> in terms of the per capita dollar amount that veterans in the state received in compensation from the VA. Today, we're 43<sup>rd</sup>. We worked with our county veterans services offices and used various media to help them reach local veterans, raising us seven places in a relatively short amount of time. But we realize that we still have a long way to go.

Just since this January, we've assisted 47 county veterans services offices to establish a web presence for their office, so that now each one has a web presence.

We have expanded our outreach in several other ways. We're launching a statewide radio campaign to make veterans aware of what they've earned and get them in to their county veterans service offices to apply. Because so many of today's veterans are connected to social media, we are poised to launch a Facebook page that's linked to a Twitter account and Flickr and YouTube video sites. Included with this package is an e-mail registration for veterans that will enable us to provide them with a monthly newsletter containing in short bites the most significant items of information that veterans need to know. We're also going to advertise on Yahoo and the Military Times web sites.

We've also partnered with the Bureau of Motor Vehicles to gather certain information. When an individual comes in to renew his or her license, registrars ask if they're a veteran, and if the answer is "yes," the information, an address for example, is provided to us. We



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are working to develop a test mass mailing of department materials to these addresses to determine if this is a viable means of reaching this population of self-identifying veterans.

We want to drive all of these veterans to their county veterans service offices. Our toll-free number, 1-877-OHIO-VET, provides numbers for each county once the first four letters of the county are entered. Our web site, [dvs.ohio.gov](http://dvs.ohio.gov), provides contact information and links to the CVSO county web sites. If they didn't have a county web site, as noted above, we created a web page for them with additional information about their office.

I spoke earlier about the county veterans service offices being the place where the connection to benefits is made and veterans begin the application process. It's thus vitally important that the county veterans service officers are properly trained to provide this assistance.

We offer training and certification to county veterans service officers. We also train and certify the county veterans service commissioners who supervise the county offices. We meet quarterly with all veterans service officers and conduct annual refresher training on a small-group level, by region or district. This annual training includes any federal or state benefit changes, so that the county officers are prepared to answer questions and properly prepare applications. Currently, we are in the process of implementing five-year recertification testing for all of the county veterans service officers.

Our training has been accredited by the six largest veterans service organizations, or "VSOs," in the state, most recently by the Disabled American Veterans. The DAV and other VSOs have representatives at the Cleveland VA Regional Office, where claims generated in Ohio are submitted. These VSO representatives receive claims filed by the county veterans service officers in which individual veterans have designated the VSO to advocate the claim on their (the veterans) behalf. This enables our department and the county veterans service officers we've trained to become advocates for claims filed through the



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VSO's. Accredited county veterans service officers will now be able to view and track these claims on both the VA's online and telephone systems. This is a powerful tool to provide more efficient claims service to veterans, which in turn brings funding from the VA into Ohio's communities.

Speaking of the VA, we're putting a great deal of effort into strengthening our lines of communications with them to improve the quality of service our veterans receive. The department has located a liaison officer at the Cleveland VA Regional Office. This person monitors claims and identifies problems. They then work to resolve these problems by directly coordinating with the county officers who originated the claims and the veterans service organizations who are advocating for the claims. Thus we have been able to expedite claims through the VA system wherever possible, and we believe these efforts have, already, gotten benefits to many veterans much quicker than if the system had just taken its course. Our liaison also provides helpful feedback on operational changes to the VA system. This feedback helps us develop the best practices to effectively serve veterans in Ohio and maximize the benefits they receive.

I touched on the Ohio Veterans Bonus earlier in my testimony, but I would like to tell you a bit more about it. This voter-approved program, funded by the sale of bonds, provides direct payments to Ohio resident veterans of the periods of the Persian Gulf War and the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. It continues a tradition of bonuses to Ohio veterans dating back to the Civil War. The payment is \$100 a month to veterans who served during the eligible periods in the Persian Gulf theater, or in the Iraq or Afghanistan theaters, up to a maximum of \$1,000. For veterans who served in other parts of the world during these times, the payment is \$50 a month up to a \$500 maximum. Veterans medically discharged as a result of combat service can receive \$1,000, regardless of how much time they spent in theater, plus up to \$500 for months of service elsewhere. Family members of those killed in action or who died from disease as a result of their in-theater service can receive a bonus of \$5,000 plus whatever the service member was eligible for, up to a total of \$6,500.



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To date, the program has paid over \$25 million to more than 30,000 Ohio veterans and families. This is money that has made a real difference in the lives of many Ohioans who voluntarily served in time of war and which undoubtedly has also found its way to local businesses.

Another major component of our mission is the direct care of veterans at our Ohio Veterans Homes in Sandusky and Georgetown. The Sandusky home opened in 1888 to care for veterans of the Civil War. The home in Georgetown is much newer, having opened in 2003. Both homes are open to honorably discharged veterans of periods of armed conflicts who are or were Ohio residents for at least one year during their lifetime. These veterans must also be infirm or disabled and incapable of earning a living. Each home offers standard nursing home care as well as special care for Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia. There are a total of 767 beds maintained between the two homes. The Sandusky home provides 427 nursing home beds and an additional 293 domiciliary or "DOM" beds, while Georgetown offers 147 nursing home beds, including 21 hospice beds. An Ohio Department of Aging survey earlier this year ranked both homes in the top 15 percent of 1,000 nursing homes in Ohio in terms of family member satisfaction for the care their loved ones receive. Both homes were also recognized in 2010 for their high level of care by both the Ohio Department of Health and the US Department of Veterans Affairs.

DVS has accomplished this while operating as economically as possible. As examples:

- DVS entered into an agreement with First Energy in Sandusky to pay for electricity at a fixed rather than a variable rate which we believe will reduce our annual electric expenses by 25 percent.
- DVS also worked with the Department of Administrative Services to purchase from federal VA procurement contracts rather than state contracts, saving additional dollars.



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- In addition, both homes pull a significant amount of federal dollars into the state each year from VA payments made based on the number of beds occupied and Medicare reimbursements for some of the care provided. We estimate these reimbursements will be \$20.4 million in fiscal year 2011.

The hospice unit at Georgetown is, in particular, a noteworthy success story. Three of four wings at Georgetown were occupied soon after it opened. The fourth and final wing opened this January as a hospice wing consisting of 21 individual rooms and beds. We were able to do this because of some innovative thinking whereby we entered into a public-private partnership with the non-profit company Stein Hospice. This partnership enabled us to offer this service at no additional cost in General Revenue Funds. Stein is able to provide the care in this new wing by drawing from Medicare and philanthropic funds that their non-profit status qualifies them for. In the meantime, the hospice wing is providing new jobs in the Georgetown area. This partnership is the first of its kind in the nation and helps veterans and their families through what can be a very difficult and trying time.

One other part of our mission involves the education and related employment of veterans. The Department serves as the Ohio agent for the federally-funded Troops to Teachers and State Approving Agency programs. Troops to Teachers assists veterans in obtaining teaching certificates and provides counseling and mentoring to place them in high-needs schools, not only to teach, but to serve as positive role models. The role of the State Approving Agency is to evaluate and approve institutions and academic programs to educate veterans through the Montgomery GI Bill and Post-9/11 GI Bill programs. And not to overemphasize the point, but these programs again provide significant federal dollars that impact our state's coffers – part of the \$4.4 billion the VA generated in Ohio in 2009 included a combined \$111 million spent on vocational rehabilitation, employment and education.



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I want to mention one final component of our mission. We believe this is a sacred trust – to honor the service of our veterans and remember those whom we’ve lost. DVS does so by planning and conducting a number of annual ceremonies, to include the Governor’s Wreath Laying Ceremony before Memorial Day, the Ohio Veterans Hall of Fame induction on Veterans Day, and the Women Veterans Conference.

In closing, the Ohio Department of Veterans Services can and will perform our mission to the high standards we’ve set for ourselves. We will continue to cultivate the relationships we’ve developed with our counties, the VA, and the VSOs and other associations and agencies in order to arrive at the best practices for serving our veterans. As with our partnership with Stein Hospice, we will continue to pursue creative and innovative ways to leverage our resources with those of others to get the job done right. And we will continue to accomplish our mission at a reasonable cost to the taxpayers of this state.

We will never forget our core mission, as spoken by Abraham Lincoln and enshrined in the rotunda of our State House – “to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and his widow and his orphan.” We would not be sitting here today if not for the sacrifices they’ve made and the blood they’ve shed.

Mr. Chairman and Committee members, thank you for time, and your interest and attention. I welcome your questions.