

Bill Hartnett, Director, Ohio Department of Veterans Services

Written Testimony of Bill Hartnett; Director, Ohio Department of Veterans Services.

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The mission of the Ohio Department of Veterans Services (ODVS) is “to actively identify, connect with and advocate for Veterans and their Families.” Since the department was established 18 months ago, we have concentrated on finding the 935,000 Veterans that VA says are Ohioans.

We started with a list of only 4000 names and addresses of Veterans 18 months ago and now we are up to 400,000 and adding approximately 20,000 new Vets each month. We are doing this with the help of our partnership, with the Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles and the Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services. They are providing contact information from Veterans who renew their driver licenses, register their vehicles with military license plates or, seek assistance about jobs and family services.

The VA has a list of Veterans in its data base. These are Vets seeking help for challenges that are extremely private and their privacy is, of course, protected by VA.

If we can't contact those Vets, let's find a way for the Veterans to contact us. To that end, we have carefully launched a marketing campaign to all Veterans in Ohio; inviting them to call 877-OHIO-VET to learn about the benefits they have earned. Our message is very simple: “Veterans! Your service may be worth more than you think. Call 1-877-OHIO-VET.”

But first, it is important that we define, “who is a Veteran.” It is important, because there are thousands of Veterans in Ohio - perhaps tens of thousands - who do not know they are Veterans. Let me explain.

These Veterans see Veterans only as people who are “retired” from the military. They incorrectly think that if they are on active duty, they are not Veterans; they incorrectly think that if they did not serve at least 20 years of active duty, they are not Veterans.

They think: “I was in the military for only four years so I'm not a Veteran.” Or, “I'm still on active duty so I'm not a Veteran.”

A Veteran is any person who honorably wears or has worn a United States military uniform, or is a member of the uniformed services of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) or the Public Health Commission Corps (PHCC).

So, our mission is two-fold:

First, we have to tell a lot of Veterans that they are Veterans and that they may be eligible for benefits.

Second, we have to tell them how to contact us.

Earlier, I said that we have carefully launched a marketing campaign to get those Veterans into our data base. I say carefully because we have to move deliberately but slowly. Slowly, because we don't want to overwhelm the County Veterans Service Offices (CVSO) which will be the primary agency that the veteran is to contact. Many of them are under staffed and underfunded.

Most of the Appalachian counties here in Southeast Ohio are good examples. They do great work...great work...as do all 88 of our CVSOs. But, if we suddenly invite tens of thousands of Veterans to call them for benefit information, they will be overwhelmed. And, we would have a few thousand very upset Veterans making unanswered or unreturned telephone calls.

Hire more people to handle the calls? Well, that's not as easy as it may sound. As you know, the county offices are funded by a half-mill of the county's property tax receipts. Of course, property taxes differ dramatically from county to county and the less affluent counties get the least money.

So, we're moving carefully...

With posters promoting our message and the 877 OHIO Vet number. Right now, they're hanging in places where people walk and wait; at barbershops and beauty salons...at state parks...BMV offices...rehabilitation services commission offices...county one-stop centers and so on.

We know that many Veterans gravitate to jobs that require uniforms. So, our posters are going to every fire department in Ohio...police departments and FOP lodges...Natural Resources and the Highway Patrol barracks.

We're working with the Ohio Council of Retail Merchants so that their member stores can give customers a pre-paid post card that they can fill out and mail back to us. That's Kroger, Giant Eagle, Walmart, Best Buy, Target, Meijer and other retailers throughout Ohio.

That's how we're working "to actively identify, connect with and advocate for Veterans and their families.

We're also doing groundbreaking work with the VA regional office in Cleveland so that communication between my department and the VA is faster, easier and clearer. How are we doing that? We have Ohio Department of Veterans Services staff in the Cleveland Regional VA office. I mean, literally, in the VA office and literally, right beside the VA staffers.

A big thank you goes to the Director of the VA Regional Office in Cleveland, Joyce Cange for her partnership with our department. Our Deputy Director, Mickey Volkman, now works from the VA office in Cleveland.

On her very first day, Mickey started working with the VA staff to implement a compensation check sheet for CVSO's. This sheet not only helps the counties to submit a complete claim for VA Compensation, but it also helps the VA to identify and recognize a compensation claim that is ready to process. This can speed the processing time considerably. Just last month, two new claims were filed, they were processed within 30 days and given a rating decision.

Not only are we working side by side with the VA but also with the military service organizations, such as the VFW, to assist with claims. Mickey, operating as a mediator in the

VA, is helping to open the communications between the VA, CVSO's and the veterans organizations. By establishing these relationships, we are building a strong teamwork attitude to help reduce the gaps between claims preparers and the claims processors and to speed up the process. The bottom line is better service for the Veterans of Ohio.

I can also tell you that other states are watching Ohio very closely and the VA in Washington also is watching. If this project works...and we have evidence that it already is working...other states could launch similar efforts.

As the VA and the Ohio DVS learn more and more about each other, new ideas are born, new procedures are being developed, and new questions are being asked and answered.

The backlog you've heard about is real but we can attack it with higher training standards at all levels. Several approaches are underway.

Ohio has a well-positioned system of CVSO's throughout the state with more than 180 county Veterans service officers who are accredited by our Department of Veterans Services. However, all of them are not accredited with the Veterans organizations that do business at the Cleveland Regional office. When they are accredited, they can communicate directly with VA to discuss a Veteran's claim. Through those accreditations we are hopeful that our CVSO's will be better able to follow the processing of the veterans' claim and to keep the veteran informed of its progress.

In Addition, if the Department of Defense would automatically place Veterans in the VA system the moment they are discharged or separated from the service, we would have Veterans on file even though they never have applied for benefits. And, we could tell them new benefits such as the diseases that now are presumed to be caused by their service in Vietnam...or Afghanistan... or Iraq...or the Persian Gulf

We have more great programs and initiatives that Ohio has implemented to better serve our Veterans:

The Ohio GI Promise represents the most significant expansion of benefits and services for veterans in Ohio since the end of World War II. The creation of the GI Promise ensures that veterans in Ohio are given every opportunity to achieve the promise of a higher education. The Board of Regents, Ohio institutions of higher education, the Ohio DVS, and many others invite America's veterans and their dependents to earn their college degrees here in Ohio, and ensure that they have the resources they need to succeed. In doing so, veterans and their families will make significant and important contributions to the state of Ohio in many ways: They will help expand Ohio's skilled work force with their knowledge and education; they will bring their maturity and motivation to Ohio's higher education classrooms; and, they will enrich Ohio's communities through their leadership, selfless-service, and dedication.

In election day 2009, 72 percent of Ohio voters went to the poles to say thank you to our Ohio veterans with the passing of Issue One, a bonus for Veterans of wars in the Persian Gulf, Iraq and Afghanistan. The passing of the bonus is expressing the gratitude to Ohio veterans for all they have done for us. Our department is working diligently on several crucial steps that must be in place before dispersing the checks. We want the bonus application and approval process to be

easily understood, accurate and efficient. The department's goal is to be mailing the first checks in November, one year from voter approval.

Last April, our department partnered with the VA Healthcare System of Ohio to host the largest Women Veterans Conference in the nation. We had almost 700 women in attendance. The one-day conference was geared toward informing women Vets of the many benefits they may be entitled to. Our department is committed to continuing our efforts to reach women Veterans through various outreach initiatives.

We also are very proud of the excellent care our State Veterans Homes provide to Ohio's heroes. Both the nursing home and domiciliary in Sandusky as well as the newer home right here in Appalachia, over in Brown county, continue to provide much needed care for more than 750 residents. Our residents come from all walks of life but have a common bond of serving our nation during our past and present conflicts and wars overseas.

The homes also provide significant employment opportunities in the areas where they are located. Our home in Brown County has added nearly 200 good paying jobs to the Appalachian region and is now the 5th largest employer in Brown County.

In the most recent Veterans Health Administration surveys conducted at both locations, the nursing home in Sandusky experienced just one minor citation, while the domiciliary in Sandusky and the Nursing home in Georgetown received perfect zero deficiency surveys. This performance is on par with the best state veterans facilities in the nation. Surveys conducted by the Ohio Department of Health also substantiate the excellent care provided by the dedicated professionals who are caring for our residents.

A program started nationally is being implemented here in Ohio by Supreme Court Justice Evelyn Lundberg Stratton. She is establishing Veterans courts to help returning Veterans with PTSD and other issues, whose problems may lead to involvement in the criminal justice system. The veteran will be given the opportunity to be assessed for required treatment including alcohol, drug, mental health and/or medical assistance. They will also be assessed for housing and/or job referrals. The Vet will have a rehabilitation plan for treatment and assistance with the VA. This is an opportunity to prevent Veterans charged with misdemeanors from falling into a life of crime.

The Ohio Department of Rehabilitations and Corrections is working with the U.S. Department of Labor, Veterans Employment and Training Service on the Incarcerated Veterans Transition Program. This program is designed to help ex-offender Veterans who are at risk of homelessness to re-enter the workforce. It provides direct services – through a case management approach – to link incarcerated Veterans with appropriate employment and life skills support as they transition from a correctional facility into the community.

The Ohio Military Injury Relief Fund (MIRF) was created by House Bill 66 in June of 2005. The purpose of the MIRF is to grant money to service members injured while serving in country under Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. The grant money paid to the service member will vary year to year, based on the amount of funds collected for the tax year.

The application process is simple and usually it takes only four to six weeks to receive a check. This program has been very helpful to Vets and their family members.

As you can see all our efforts are focused on better serving all Veterans of Ohio and continuing to build and enhance our partnerships. We acknowledge that our system is flawed but we are not stuck in decades old time and tradition. Not only are we looking for new and more effective policies and procedures, we are finding them and implementing them...all to improve our service to the Veterans who served us.

We are “actively identifying...connecting with...and advocating for our Veterans and their families.” And never will we be satisfied.

Thank you for your time and this opportunity to speak with you.