

# ANNUAL REPORT

Fiscal Year

2014



August 1, 2014

Governor Kasich and Secretary Husted,

It is my honor to lead the Ohio Department of Veterans Services. In keeping with my statutory duties, I'm pleased to present to you the Fiscal Year 2014 Annual Report which chronicles our responsibilities and the actions we are undertaking on behalf of Ohio's veterans.

The nearly 900,000 veterans who live in our state – the sixth largest population of veterans in the U.S. – are a testament to Ohio's legacy of men and women willing to answer the call to service. This legacy continues today, as thousands of Ohioans have served in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Everyone in this Department believes it is our sacred duty to do all that we can on behalf of the men and women today, and the veterans of every generation, who have put their lives on the line to guarantee our freedoms.



The Department's mission is "Empowering the veteran and military community to lead better lives through services, support, and economic opportunity." Our goal is to ensure that all veterans receive the benefits they have earned from both the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the State of Ohio. In turn, this is a great economic engine for our state – for example, the VA spent a state record-high \$6.6 billion in federal Fiscal Year 2013, with nearly \$1.84 billion of that total going to direct compensation to veterans.

This Annual Report provides you a detailed picture of how we are accomplishing this vital mission. The Department will continue to work together with you to maintain Ohio as a place that veterans of all eras and their families are proud to call home.

Sincerely,



Timothy C. Gorrell  
Director  
Ohio Department of Veterans Services



**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**INTRODUCTION ..... 3**

**EXECUTION OF MISSION ..... 4**

**PROFILE OF VETERANS IN OHIO ..... 5**

**IMPACT OF FEDERAL SPENDING ..... 5**

**SERVING AND SUPPORTING ..... 8**

**THE YEAR IN REVIEW ..... 9**

**Veteran Workforce and Economic Opportunity ..... 11**

**Military Liaison ..... 14**

**Justice-Involved Veterans ..... 14**

**Outreach ..... 16**

**Training and Standards ..... 18**

**Liaison Office, Cleveland Veterans Affairs Regional Office ..... 20**

**Ohio Veterans Homes ..... 21**

**Legislative Activity ..... 24**

**Ohio Veterans Bonus ..... 26**

**Veterans Educational Programs ..... 28**

**Public Ceremonies and Events ..... 29**

**Veterans' Records ..... 30**

**CONCLUSION ..... 31**

## INTRODUCTION

The Ohio Department of Veterans Services (ODVS) was created as a Cabinet-level agency on August 21, 2008, by Senate Bill 289 of the 127<sup>th</sup> Ohio General Assembly. Senate Bill 289 gave the Department the responsibility to work directly with the County Veterans Service Offices (CVSOs) and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), as well as with the various veterans service organizations and other concerned associations.

The mission of ODVS is “Empowering the veteran and military community to lead better lives through services, support, and economic opportunity.” This mission supports the Department’s vision of “An Ohio that is the best place for veterans, service members, and their families to live, work, thrive, and call home.”

On October 4, 2013 Governor John Kasich selected Timothy Gorrell as the third director of ODVS. Director Gorrell served 31 years in the U.S. Army, retiring as a Colonel, and commanded both a company and a battalion. Director Gorrell deployed to Bosnia as a Field Artillery officer and later served as Chief of Staff of Third U.S. Army in Kuwait. His last military assignment was as the Command Inspector General of the Ohio National Guard. Prior to assuming his current position, Director Gorrell served as Deputy Inspector General for the State of Ohio.





## EXECUTION OF MISSION

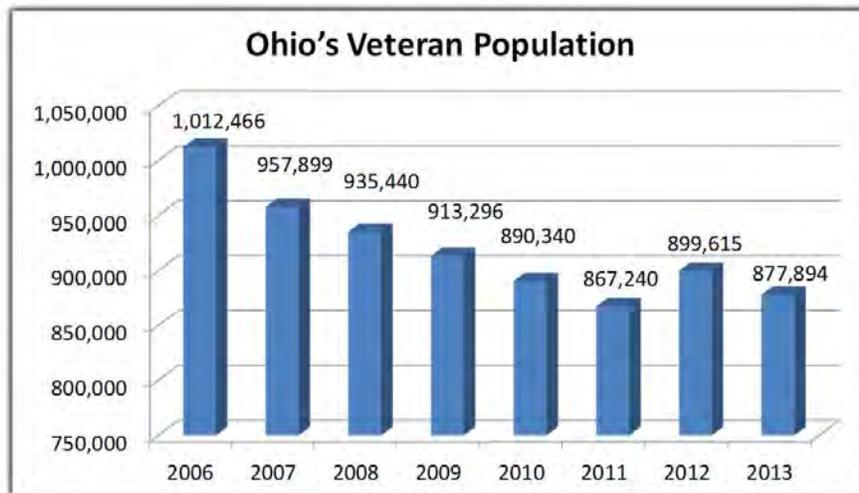
The Department carries out its mission by conducting the following major priorities and programs:

- Engages employers and other stakeholders within and outside of government to encourage employment of veterans.
- Communicates with other state and local agencies concerning veterans' programs and coordinates support to veterans.
- Conducts outreach to veterans.
- Provides training and certification to service officers within the 88 CVSOs to enable them to prepare VA claims for veterans.
- Coordinates programs and operations with the VA, which provides benefits to Ohio veterans.
- Operates the Ohio Veterans Homes in Sandusky and Georgetown which are open to Ohio-resident veterans who served in periods of armed conflicts.
- Works with the Ohio General Assembly and Congressional representatives to craft legislation in support of veterans and their families at the state and federal levels.
- 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.
- Manages two federal education-related programs: Troops to Teachers and the State Approving Agency.
- Hosts several veterans' ceremonies each year including the Governor's Wreath-Laying Ceremony to honor Ohio's killed in action and the Ohio Veterans Hall of Fame induction ceremony.
- Maintains custodianship of over 1.9 million veterans' records dating back to World War II.

## PROFILE OF VETERANS IN OHIO

The VA estimates state veterans' populations and compiles funding statistics during each federal fiscal year. In federal Fiscal Year 2013 (Oct. 1, 2012 – Sept. 30, 2013), Ohio's veterans' population was estimated to be nearly 880,000. This represents the sixth-largest veterans' population in the country.

A breakdown of the state's population is highlighted in the graph below. The overall number of veterans will likely continue to decrease as veterans from World War II and the Korean War pass away. However, there remains a sizable community of Vietnam veterans in the state and a growing population of Afghanistan and Iraq veterans.



★ Ohio Currently has the 6<sup>th</sup> Largest Veterans Population in the Nation.

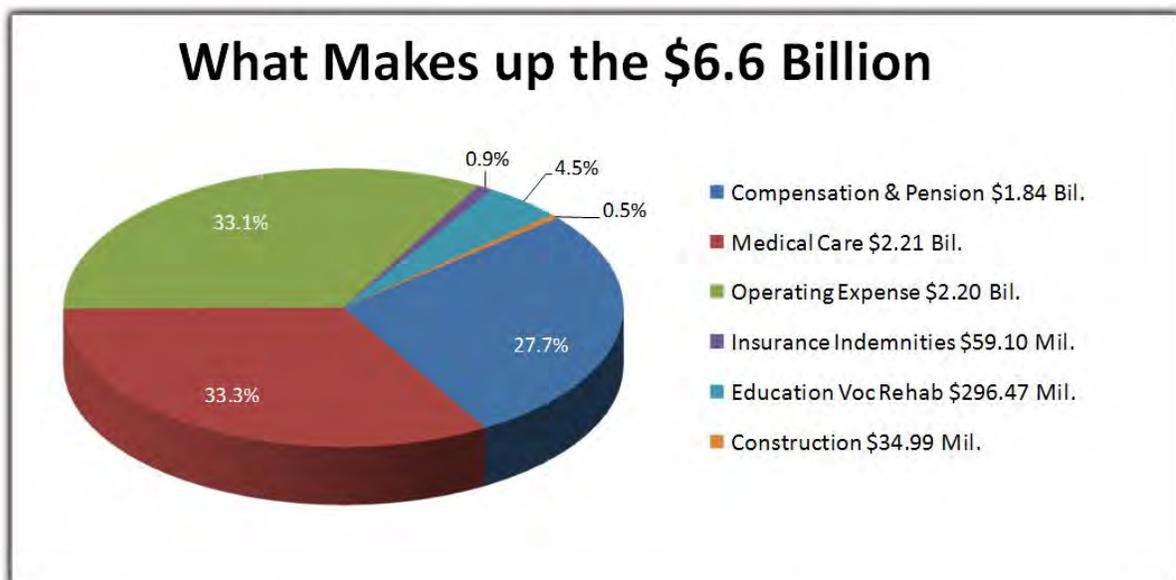
\*Source - VA Annual Geographic Distribution of VA Expenditures (GDY) Report 2006-2013

## ECONOMIC IMPACT OF FEDERAL SPENDING

The success of ODVS in accomplishing its mission directly impacts the economic health of Ohio. Most of the benefits received by veterans originate at the federal level.

These benefits are comprised of disability compensation for injuries, health care, educational assistance, home loans and many other programs provided by the VA. In federal FY 2013, the VA spent over \$6.6 billion in Ohio, a record high in VA spending in the state and an increase of over \$838 million from the previous year. These dollars directly benefited Ohio veterans as well as the state’s local communities and colleges.

The composition of VA funds brought to Ohio is shown in the chart below:

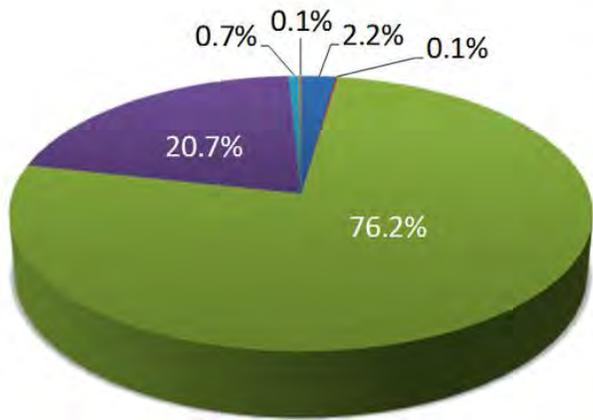


*\*Source - VA Annual Geographic Distribution of VA Expenditures (GDX) Report 2013*

The FY 2014 budget of ODVS allowed it both to perform its mission and to provide exceptional service to veterans while exercising good stewardship of taxpayer dollars.

The Department spent a total of \$83.8 million on all programs in FY 2014, as highlighted in the first chart on the following page. Funding came from four major sources, to include \$36.01 million in state general revenue funds, which is shown in the second chart on the following page.

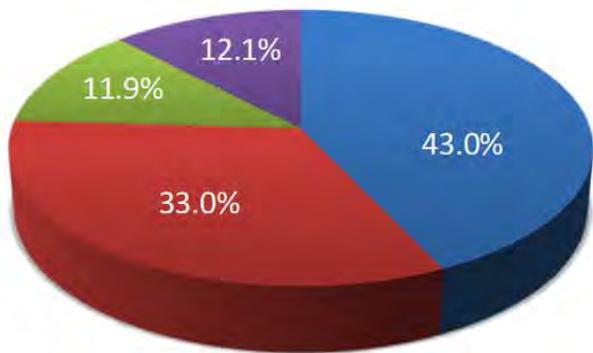
### Expenditures by Program



- DVS Veteran Services \$1.84 Mil.
- Veterans Hall of Fame \$.10 Mil.
- Ohio Veterans Homes \$63.82 Mil.
- Veterans Bonus Program \$17.36 Mil.
- State Approving Agency \$.58 Mil.
- Troops to Teachers \$.10 Mil.

**Total: \$83.80 Mil.**

### Expenditures by Funding Source



- General Revenue Fund \$36.01 Mil.
- Federal Funds \$27.65 Mil.
- Other Generated Funds \$9.97 Mil.
- Veterans Bonus Bond Proceeds \$10.17 Mil.

**Total: \$83.80 Mil.**

## SERVING AND SUPPORTING

Fulfilling the mission of empowering veterans also brings with it the challenge of identifying veterans. The Department and its partners work each day to serve veterans and make them aware of benefits so that they may receive the support earned by their service. Some veterans of all eras, however, often don't realize they might qualify for benefits. For example, a veteran who injured his leg jumping from the back of a truck during peacetime service 30 years ago – and whose injury healed at the time – could be eligible for compensation today if the injury developed into arthritis. While the VA has relatively accurate estimates of the number of veterans living in each county, identifying and contacting those veterans continues to be a priority mission for ODVS.



Once veterans are identified, work begins to connect them to their benefits in the County Veterans Service Office (CVSO) of their respective county. The CVSO works for a County Veterans Service Commission (CVSC) whose members are nominated by veterans service organizations and appointed by a county common pleas judge.



ODVS is responsible for the training and certification of both service officers and commissioners. This training is primarily focused on VA claims work.

The CVSOs help veterans apply for the benefits they have earned and also provide them with direct financial assistance when necessary. Historically, veterans in all states receive about 40 percent more of the federal benefits they have earned when they receive assistance applying for them.

## THE YEAR IN REVIEW

FY 2014 saw significant steps forward in several different areas to better serve Ohio's veterans and their families.

Governor John Kasich signed House Bill 488 on June 16. This landmark legislation includes a number of provisions that help veterans find employment by streamlining the path to professional licenses for those with military training and experience. The bill also standardizes procedures for granting academic credit for military training and experience, enabling veterans to get higher education degrees faster. This strengthened the provisions of an earlier bill, House Bill 98, that required licensing agencies to apply experience gained in the military toward state licenses.

Another piece of legislation significantly benefited 100 percent disabled veterans. House Bill 85, signed by the Governor on June 12, expanded the Homestead Exemption to allow 100 percent disabled veterans to exempt \$50,000 of the value of their home of residence from property tax. It also exempts these veterans from the \$30,000 annual household income limit applied to other property owners.

Director Tim Gorrell and Assistant Director Jason Dominguez actively engaged more than 130 Ohio businesses, educating their leadership on the benefits of hiring veterans as well as the ways to most effectively support the veterans they currently employ. The efforts of both private and public sector employers in Ohio, as well as state partners,



have combined to significantly lower Ohio's veteran unemployment rate. This rate, as measured in a yearly average from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, stood at 6.8 percent in 2013, down from 10.7 percent in 2011.

The ODVS leadership also reached out to the leadership of Ohio's veterans' organizations through the Department's Veterans Advisory Committee, to work more closely with these vital partners in veterans' services. Director Gorrell and Assistant Director Dominguez also involved the veterans' organization representatives who are members of the Advisory Committee in events such as the State of the State Address and the Holocaust Memorial dedication.

In addition, Director Gorrell embarked on a plan to visit each one of the 88 CVSOs, and by June 30 he had traveled to 51 counties. These visits allow him to get to know the people who are on the front line of service to veterans and learn the local issues.

The ongoing efforts by the Department's staff, combined with the work of the CVSOs and state veterans' organizations, are producing positive results in connecting Ohio's veterans to their benefits. For example, the percentage of all Ohio veterans who are connected to disability compensation rose to nearly 13 percent in federal FY 2013. This was a percentage-point increase over the level of the previous year.

As described earlier in this report, the VA spent a record \$6.6 billion in Ohio in federal FY 2013. In four key expenditure areas – medical care, education, compensation, and pension – the total spent amounted to \$4.3 billion. This continued an upward trend of VA spending in the state and represents a noteworthy increase since 2010 of \$1.1 billion in dollars that directly benefit Ohio veterans.

The succeeding paragraphs outline specific accomplishments by the ODVS staff and partners.

## Veteran Workforce and Economic Opportunity

The Ohio Department of Veterans Services Office of Veterans Programs (OVP) advocates for the development and implementation of programs, policies, regulations, and legislation to benefit veterans, servicemembers and their families. This is accomplished through collaboration with other state agencies and coordination with federal, local, and private partners.

During FY 2014, OVP spearheaded initiatives in a number of diverse areas such as employment, education, veteran justice outreach, homelessness, military family support, veteran-owned business, mental health, and substance abuse.

### Employment and Education Reform:

In 2011, OVP first proposed a number of reforms to how Ohio's employment and education systems operate for veterans and their families. Initial efforts included the "Battlefront to Homefront" initiative to better connect returning Ohio National Guard members to employment support through the Ohio Department of Jobs and Family



Services (ODJFS) and assessments of veteran services available at University System of Ohio institutions. Taking experience and knowledge gained from those efforts, OVP forged ahead with partners from the Governor's Office of Workforce Transformation (OWT) and the Board of Regents (OBR) to better leverage the renewed focus on aligning employment and education systems to the benefit of the veteran and military community. That initiative secured a number of important statutory and policy improvements in this area, to include:

- Establishing "Four Key Strategies" of the Ohio Veterans Workforce Initiative that guide efforts to assist veterans who are entering the work force:

- 1) Workforce support for transitioning veterans and current veteran residents;
  - 2) Credit for military training and experience through Ohio's universities, colleges, and licensing authorities;
  - 3) Linking employers to veterans;
  - 4) Attracting and retaining veterans from across the country to Ohio.
- Partnering to propose, draft, and implement the Governor's Executive Order 2013-05K, issued in June 2013, that directed the development of recommendations to better support veterans, servicemembers, and spouses in pursuing their college degrees and professional licenses in the State of Ohio through improved credit for military experience, prioritization of service, and improved outreach efforts.
  - Working with the Ohio General Assembly and the Governor's Office to support passage and implementation of key pieces of legislation, House Bill 98 and House Bill 488, that codify and refine the recommendations developed through Executive Order 2013-05K. OVP is a participant in the Military Strategic Implementation Team, spearheaded by the Board of Regents and University System of Ohio, to ensure that the college credit and veteran service program portions of House Bill 488 are fully in place by the end of calendar year 2014.
  - Partnering with OWT, OBR, ODJFS, and the Ohio National Guard for improved coordination of state agency support for employers hiring veterans and veterans looking for work through innovative systems such as Ohio Means Jobs and collaboration with the Governor's Executive Workforce Board.

State Agency Cooperation: OVP continued to provide DVS representation and operational support to important multi-agency organizations and initiatives promoting various veterans services throughout state government. In all of these initiatives, OVP also works to identify and engage relevant veteran and military community partners, such as the VA or CVSOs, to assist in these efforts.

Initiatives include:

- Collaborating with the Ohio Development Services Agency to better promote veteran-owned business services available through a statewide system of 27 Small Business Development Centers and Procurement Technical Assistance Centers.
- Serving as the ODVS representative to the Ohio Department of Education's State Commission on Education for Military Children, a multi-state Compact that commits Ohio to ensuring that children of servicemembers receive fair treatment in Ohio's K-12 education system.
- Providing coordinative support and ODVS representation to the Ohio War Orphans Scholarship Board, ensuring educational opportunities to the children of Ohio's fallen and injured military veterans, in partnership with the Ohio Board of Regents.
- Acting as the ODVS designee to the Ohio Ex-Offender Reentry Coalition, a multi-agency partnership led by the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections to better connect formerly incarcerated persons with employment, housing, and medical services that will reduce instances of criminal recidivism.
- Participating in the Ohio National Guard OHIOCARES Subcommittee, working with federal, state, local and private partners to ensure improved access to mental health and traumatic brain injury referral services for members of the Ohio National Guard.
- Serving as the ODVS representative to the Project VETS Statewide Advisory Committee led by the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, collaborating with federal, state, and local agencies, non-profits, law enforcement, courts and the legal community to provide diversionary services for veterans who enter the justice system through the use of specialized dockets.
- Participating in statewide efforts to reduce veteran homelessness through initiatives led by the Ohio Interagency Collaborative on Homelessness and Affordable Housing and regional efforts such as the Northwest Ohio Veterans Homelessness Summit.

These efforts support the ODVS vision to help build an Ohio that is the best place for veterans, servicemembers, and their families to live, work, thrive, and call home.

## **Military Liaison**

The Military Liaison has continued to build mutually beneficial relationships with U.S. Department of Defense entities inside and outside of Ohio in support of the broader ODVS mission. A special emphasis has been placed on active duty recruiters and federal reserve components that do not have strong connections to Ohio's community support efforts. Progress has been made with every branch of the military. Noteworthy advancements include:

- Expanding ODVS outreach to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, to include regular bi-weekly briefings to new incoming USAF personnel and participation in their Community Partnership initiative.
- Developing a relationship with the Navy Office of Community Outreach to facilitate the dissemination of information to personnel in Ohio. Similar relationships are continually being developed with other federal military entities and outreach is being conducted through unit-level briefings, resource fairs, and reintegration events.
- Participating in Ohio National Guard Inter-Services Family Assistance Committee (ISFAC) and leveraging National Guard communication networks to help ensure the broadest dissemination of information for all members of the Armed Forces and their families throughout Ohio.

These and other efforts by the Military Liaison have garnered recognition from the federal Warrior and Family Support Office, an initiative of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, where Ohio's reputation as a national leader in supporting the military and veterans continues to grow.

## **Justice-Involved Veterans**

Ensuring appropriate justice for veterans in the court system is a priority for the Department. This builds upon efforts begun in 2011 by former Ohio Supreme



Court Justice Evelyn Stratton. Courts throughout the state are studying the implementation of special Veterans' Courts, where the emphasis is on treatment and diversion rather than punishment. Currently, 14 jurisdictions have Veterans' Courts, and Veterans' Courts are under consideration in at least two other locations. The Ohio Department of Veterans Services has established effective working relationships with these courts in order to provide guidance and assistance on issues like

sustainable funding and obtaining certification from the Ohio Supreme Court. Locations of Ohio's Veterans' Courts are shown on the map above.

The Department is also working closely with the Ohio Ex-Offender Re-entry Coalition to identify and assist veterans leaving the criminal justice system. The objective of this relationship is to ensure that veterans are identified and linked with additional resources that will help prevent recidivism.

In 2012, two veteran-oriented legal assistance programs were launched with the help of ODVS. The first is the Ohio Military/Veterans Legal Assistance Program, which was recently renamed Operation Legal Help Ohio. This program, which was the first of its kind in the nation, provides free legal representation to veterans when they go to court in civil matters like foreclosure, credit card collections and domestic relations/child custody matters. Volunteer lawyers will also provide representation



in dissolutions and child support matters. The program began as a pilot located in Central Ohio, saw tremendous growth in 2013 and now has commitments from 250 lawyers in 34 of Ohio's 88 counties. Full statewide participation remains the program's ultimate goal. The second program is the Lt. Jonathan Grassbaugh Legal Assistance Project at The Ohio State University. ODVS assists this program to recruit lawyers to supervise law students who will be trained to provide legal assistance to military service members and veterans.

## Outreach

Communications efforts continued to focus on outreach through a variety of means. The Department maintained an active presence on Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and YouTube. The ODVS website, which records about 20,000 visits each month, was continually updated with Department and other news releases related to veterans. Direct outreach at veterans-themed events, such as unit re-integration briefings, partnership events with the VA, and veterans' days at various venues to include the Ohio State Fair, were ongoing by members of the ODVS staff, Ohio Veterans Homes staff, and the Ohio Veterans Bonus team.

The Department published a pocket-sized, spiral-bound "Benefits Resource Guide" in FY 2013 that describes every federal and state benefit available to veterans in Ohio, a brief explanation of how to access these benefits by applying through their CVSO, and contact information for all CVSOs and VA facilities. This publication has been extremely successful. More than 60,000 of these guides were distributed to veterans in Ohio by the end of FY 2013, an increase of over 20,000 from the total at the end of the previous year.



Building on the success of the Resource Guide, ODVS began work with a private contractor in FY 2013 to build a mobile phone application that contains a summary of veterans' benefits, links to employment information, contact information for CVSOs and the VA, and interactive maps and directions to get there. The app was launched statewide in November 2013.



By the end of FY 2014, there were more than 6,500 new users who had downloaded the app.

The Department's e-mail listserv grew to over 5,000 subscribers, an increase of more than 400 over FY 2013. The listserv is a channel for issuing a monthly newsletter as well as periodic news releases and other items of interest to the veterans' community.

Statewide radio and TV advertising on both general veterans' benefits and the Ohio Veterans Bonus was done in a six-week package through the Ohio Association of Broadcasters.

Two weeks of newspaper ads highlighting the Ohio Veterans Hall of Fame and the Ohio Veterans Bonus appeared in 104 community newspapers, as well as online in 20 of the state's largest newspapers. Ten weeks of online ads in the Military Times family of newspapers focused on the advantages Ohio offers to veterans. Ads on shopping carts at the 28 highest-volume Kroger stores in Ohio ran for a six-month period, encouraging veterans to apply for benefits at their CVSO. In addition, an insert to driver's license renewals, encouraging veterans to apply for benefits, was mailed in partnership with the Bureau of Motor Vehicles (BMV) to more than 3.5 million Ohioans during the first quarter of calendar year 2014.



The Department's toll-free number, 1-877-OHIOVET, allows veterans to be directly connected to their county veterans service office or to the Ohio Veterans Bonus team. Calls to this number during the first six months of calendar year 2014 averaged roughly 2,970 per month. Compared to the same period in 2013, this represented a total increase of more than 5,000 calls.

For over three years, ODVS has maintained a partnership with the BMV to gather names, addresses, and age information of persons who self-identify as veterans when asked by a deputy registrar at the time they renew their driver's license. Fifteen CVSOs have entered into agreements with the Department to obtain access to the data base for their county. The list has also been used on a targeted basis by ODVS, such as a mailing to veterans who, by age, were most likely to be eligible for the Ohio Veterans Bonus for Persian Gulf War era service.

### **Training and Standards**

ODVS, in conjunction with the Ohio Association of County Veterans Service Officers (OSACVSO), Ohio State Association of County Veterans Service Commissioners (OSACVSC), and the VA, provides training and certification to CVSOs and CVSCs. The Department meets quarterly with all veterans service officers and conducts annual refresher training 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 claims applications.

CVSO training is a vital investment in serving the state's veterans because of continuing changes in VA compensation, pension and other benefits claims processes. To develop and present this training, the Department works cooperatively with the OSACVSO, which is recognized as one of the premier associations in the United States, and has trained service officers on the national level. Such training enhances the CVSO's ability to assemble what the VA refers to as a "fully-developed claim" with all available

documentation present. In an era in which the backlog of veterans' claims with the VA is gradually being addressed, one of the best tools to further reduce the backlog is to submit fully-developed claims that in turn are "ready to rate." These claims can be decided quickly so that veterans will begin receiving the benefits that they have earned and need. Approximately two-thirds of claims submitted by CVSOs in FY 2104 were fully-developed.

Throughout the fiscal year, ODVS continued a two-part program of training the new and reappointed CVSCs to become more knowledgeable of their duties and responsibilities concerning veterans under Ohio Revised Code Title 59, the Sunshine Laws, and the ethical standards for a commissioner.



The Department's goal is to improve their technical knowledge and help them improve the efficiency of their county operations wherever possible. This training also makes a commissioner able to operate more effectively with their county board of commissioners. The Department is now 80 percent through a five-year process of conducting this training.

The Department this year also forged ahead with its 2012 initiative, intended to continuously improve and upgrade county operations, called the Strategic Planning Initiative. Department staff members meet regularly with representatives from the OSACVSCs and OSACVSOs. The goal of these sessions is to improve operations, develop standards, and identify ways to improve service delivery to veterans in all counties. A major product of this effort is the publication of the County Veterans Service Office Handbook.

### **Liaison Office, Cleveland Veterans Affairs Regional Office**

The Ohio Department of Veterans Services established a liaison office to the Cleveland VA Regional Office (VARO) in 2011. The goal of the liaison office is to empower CVSOs through opportunities of innovation, communication, and access to technology.

The success of the liaison office depends on open and trusted relations with the VARO and the National Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs), as well as with the CVSOs. This relationship is consistent with a “One Team - One Fight” focus to ensure our nation’s veterans and their families receive the benefits that they are entitled to through timely and quality service, advocacy, and proper adjudication.



The liaison office maintains direct communication with all the organizations touching veterans’ lives in order to find ways to improve claims processing; maintain accountability for claims submitted by CVSOs; promote and support information technology; and assist in special case management.

Ohio’s five largest VSOs – the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans, American Veterans, and Vietnam Veterans of America – have all certified the training offered by ODVS in partnership with the state service officer association. These veterans’ organizations have extended their organizational accreditation to Ohio CVSOs. This enables ODVS and the CVSOs to work together as frontline advocates for veterans and their families at the Cleveland VARO. ODVS’s liaison role allows for quality assurance of claims work and assistance with claims that need immediate attention or special management.

One of the greatest benefits of ODVS’s liaison with the VARO is a partnership to assist the CVSOs by providing information and status of claims filed. The VARO extends

computer systems access to qualified and trained CVSOs. This access allows CVSOs to ensure claims are received, monitor the claims process and view rating decisions accordingly.

### Ohio Veterans Homes

A major part of the Department's mission is operating the Ohio Veterans Homes (OVH), a responsibility assumed when the Department was created in August 2008. The homes provide direct nursing home care at facilities in Sandusky and Georgetown, as well as a domiciliary (similar to independent living) to qualified veterans in Sandusky. The Sandusky home opened in 1888 to care for veterans of the Civil War. The home in Georgetown opened in 2003.





Both homes and the domiciliary 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 infirmed 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 868 beds maintained between the two homes.

The Sandusky home provides 427 nursing home beds and an additional 293 domiciliary or “DOM” beds. The DOM total includes an 84-bed domiciliary plus (DOM+) unit. The DOM+ is open to veterans who can mostly live independently, but still require some additional supervision and prompting for issues such as medication and meal times. Georgetown offers 148 nursing home beds.

The table on the following page shows the number of residents that were served at each OVH facility throughout FY 2014:

<b>Ohio Veterans Homes, FY 2014, Residents Served</b>			
	<u>Sandusky</u>	<u>Georgetown</u>	<u>Total</u>
<b>Nursing home (standard and special care)</b>	574	205	779
<b>Domiciliary</b>	221	n/a	221
			<b>1,000</b>

Throughout the fiscal year, the homes continued providing quality care, recognized in inspections by both the VA and the Ohio Department of Health, at a cost of care about one-third that of private nursing homes.

Per-resident per diem funding by the VA, combined with a sliding scale resident assessment based on ability to pay, provides long-term care value at the homes both for veterans and their families as well as taxpayers. This continues a trend of OVH’s

decreasing reliance on General Revenue Fund (GRF) dollars – from FY 2004, when GRF funding comprised 61 percent of the Homes’ budget, to 42 percent in FY 2014. VA per diem funding, meanwhile, increased from 28 percent to 37 percent of OVH’s budget. All of this allows the OVH facilities to continue to provide a high quality of care and activities for veteran residents without compromising standards.

The OVH facilities have made the most of the funds allocated to them by engaging in several cost-saving strategies. Chief among those during this fiscal year was a major project to improve the cemetery in Sandusky.

The Sandusky home’s veterans cemetery required significant work to bring it into compliance with National Cemetery Association (NCA) shrine standards and State Cemetery Grant Services (SCGS) requirements. OVH did not seek state funds for this purpose, and instead was awarded a \$690,000 grant from the VA in May 2012 to fund the project. The work began in FY 2013 and was finished in December 2013. The renovation included repairing or replacing existing headstones, resetting and realigning all of the headstones, restoring associated turf and the removal of trees that may interfere with current and future grave sites. This hallowed ground is the final resting place of 4,177 men and women veterans of Ohio, dating back to those who served in the Civil War and continuing with some resident burials today. This number includes two Medal of Honor recipients and 11 Purple Heart recipients.

Other cost-saving strategies included:

- Using VA contracts for purchasing rather than state contracts, which leverages VA purchasing power to the homes’ advantage.
- Purchasing utilities in the open market via competitive bidding.
- Improving HVAC systems to become more energy efficient.
- Improved management of fleet vehicles.

## Legislative Activity

Throughout the fiscal year, ODVS continued to actively work with the administration of Governor John R. Kasich and sponsors in the Ohio General Assembly to assist in crafting legislation to support Ohio veterans and their families.

In June of 2013 Governor Kasich signed Executive Order 2013-05K and in 2014 his vision for veterans came full circle when he signed House Bill 98 and House Bill 488. Together these two pieces of landmark legislation pave the road charted by Governor Kasich to ensure Ohio becomes one of the best states in the nation for veterans and service- members to call home. Together they comprise legislative directives, for boards and commissions and public colleges and universities, to ensure that a veteran's military experience is valued and honored in the job market or educational arena. The bills streamline the path for veterans to receive a professional license for a skill in which they have military training and experience, and standardize procedures for academic credit to be granted, without cost, for the knowledge and skills gained in military service. These measures are to be in place by the end of 2014. Governor Kasich has also crafted tools to ensure that the gap between a private employer's needs and a veteran's skills are available within a few mouse clicks through an enhanced Ohio Means Jobs web site. The bill-signing ceremony for House Bill 488 is shown on the following page.

While ensuring Ohio appropriately values a veterans' occupational experience, Governor Kasich also sought to honor a veterans' personal sacrifice by doubling the Homestead Exemption for military veterans who are 100 percent disabled from a service-connected disability when he signed House Bill 85. To further honor disabled veterans, Governor Kasich signed House Bill 206, which officially created the "Disabled American Veteran" license plate to raise awareness of the more than 90,000 veterans who are members of Ohio DAV chapters.



Specific legislation is outlined below:

- **House Bill 85** (Gonzales, Terhar)  
Enhances the homestead exemption for military veterans who are 100% disabled from a service-connected disability. This will double the current homestead exemption from the first \$25,000 to the first \$50,000 of a 100% disabled veterans home.
- **House Bill 98 Occupational Licensing Law** (Gonzales, Retherford)  
Revises the Occupational Licensing Law regarding military service members (to include active, guard or reserve members) and veterans, and requires each of Ohio's occupational licensing agencies to apply an individual's military training and experience toward the requirements to receive that license.
- **HB 206 DAV License Plate** (Retherford)  
Creates the "Disabled American Veteran" license plate.
- **House Bill 488 MBR Higher Education & Veterans** (Dovilla, Landis)  
Strengthens House Bill 98 provisions, allows for "Veterans Hiring Preference" for private companies, increases identity theft protection for active duty service members, requires Ohio's higher education institution to grant free college credit for military experience and encourages student-led veteran friendly organizations on campus.

## Ohio Veterans Bonus

The Ohio Veterans Bonus is a program administered directly by ODVS that provides a direct financial benefit to veterans and their families. Ohio voters overwhelmingly approved the Bonus in November 2009 and in August 2010 the Department launched the program statewide. The Bonus was funded by the sale of bonds and the law authorizing it stated that it would pay a defined benefit to Ohio resident veterans of the periods of the Persian Gulf War and the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. A rule change recommended by the Department in June 2011 protects the privacy of Bonus applications and supporting documents.

The Ohio Veterans Bonus continues a tradition of awarding bonuses to Ohio veterans that dates 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 \$6,500.

Dec. 31, 2013 was the deadline for Ohio veterans to apply for a bonus for active duty service during the Persian Gulf War period from Aug. 3, 1990 to March 3, 1991. The Department conducted an ongoing multi-year outreach to make veterans aware of the benefit and the deadline. The efforts during the fiscal year included a major post card mailing to thousands of possible veterans of the era accompanied by a statewide media push, resulting in an additional more than 9,000 applications between October 2013 through January 2014.

The application deadline for veterans who served in Iraq between March 19, 2003 and Dec. 31, 2011 is Dec. 31, 2014, and similar outreach is under way. The Bonus will remain in effect for veterans who served in Afghanistan, or anywhere else in the world,

from Oct. 7, 2001 until the President declares an end to the war in Afghanistan. Applicants who are eligible at that time will have an additional three years to apply.



The Ohio Veterans Bonus program has been extremely successful. By the end of FY 2014, the Bonus program paid over \$65.6 million to more than 81,000 Ohio veterans and families. The statistics as of June 30, 2014 are shown below:

**Ohio Veterans Bonus, Totals Approved and Disbursed**

	Number of New Applications Received	Number of Applications Approved for Payment	Amount Approved For Payment
<b>FY 2011</b>	46,333	42,298	\$35,011,993
<b>FY 2012</b>	12,139	14,782	\$12,825,541
<b>FY 2013</b>	11,323	9,561	\$8,076,484
<b>FY 2014</b>	13,807	14,768	\$9,718,103
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>83,602</b>	<b>81,409</b>	<b>\$65,632,121</b>

## Veterans Educational Programs

The Ohio Department of Veterans Services is the Ohio agent for the federally-funded Veterans Educational Programs (VEP) Office, which oversees the Troops to Teachers (TTT) and State Approving Agency (SAA) programs.

TTT 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 in their schools and local communities. In this way, the experience of veterans is passed on to help shape the future leaders of Ohio.

The principal role of the SAA is to function as an extension of the VA's educational programs. SAA audits academic programs at more than 750 VA-approved institutions to ensure that they are in compliance with federal policies and are providing student veterans with the benefits they are entitled to. In federal FY 2013, the VA spent more than \$296.4 million in Ohio on vocational rehabilitation, employment and education. This amount represents an increase of roughly \$27.7 million from 2012 and an overall increase of \$185 million from 2009 spending. This ranks Ohio 14<sup>th</sup> in the nation in receiving these types of VA benefits, which during FY 2014 served more than 23,000 student veterans and eligible family members in Ohio.

The year 2014 marks the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the original GI Bill by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on June 22, 1944. The legacy of that landmark legislation continues today as the GI Bill keeps its promise to those who choose to serve.



## **Public Ceremonies and Events**

Each year, ODVS plans and conducts a number of official events to honor Ohio veterans.

The Governor's Wreath-Laying Ceremony is held each year the week prior to Memorial Day weekend to honor the men and women of Ohio who were killed during the previous year in service to the nation. In 2014, two fallen service members were honored. Immediately preceding this ceremony was the Ohio General Assembly's Joint Session in which the next-of-kin of the fallen were awarded the Ohio Medal of Distinction on their loved one's behalf.



A ceremony is held every November, near Veterans Day, to welcome the distinguished veterans selected for induction into the Ohio Veterans Hall of Fame. The Hall was established in 1992 to honor Ohioans for their post-military contributions. At the most recent induction in November 2013, 15 more veterans joined the Hall that now includes a total of 443 astronauts, government officials, police officers, community leaders, and veterans' advocates.



The contributions and challenges of African-American veterans were recognized in a panel discussion held during Black History Month in February 2014. A panel of five veterans from World War II, the Korean War era, the Vietnam War and the war in Afghanistan shared their experiences and the obstacles they had to overcome.

Women now comprise over 14 percent of the active military, and their accomplishments were recognized at a panel discussion in honor of Women's History Month in March 2014. Five women veterans of the post-9/11 era shared their stories of service and deployments, as well as their personal views on women in combat.

The Department also maintains a Women Veterans' Advisory Committee. Every other year, ODVS and the Women Veterans' Advisory Committee host a statewide conference to highlight women veterans' issues. The most recent edition took place in September 2013, with former POW Jessica Lynch as the keynote speaker. This conference was the largest such gathering in the U.S., attracting over 700 women veterans, which was 200 more than at the previous event in October 2011. The next women veterans' conference will take place in September 2015.

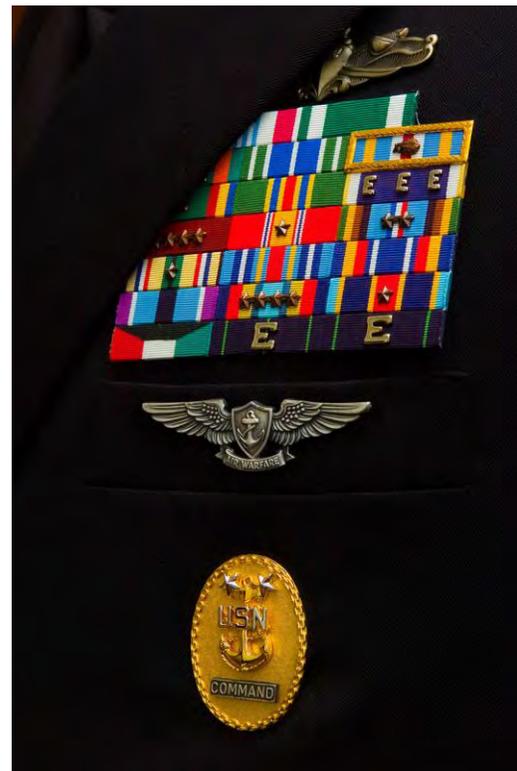
### **Veterans' Records**

In FY 2013, ODVS became the first state veteran Department to be granted access to military records through the electronic portal of the Defense Personnel Records Information System (DPRIS). As a result of the successful test of the system at the Department level, Ohio was also the first state to be granted permission to allow each of the 88 CVSOs to access these military records through DPRIS. Seventy-seven of the 88 counties have now activated their access to the DPRIS system. In counties with multiple offices, additional access permission was requested and granted for a total of 94 county veteran service officers who have obtained access.

This access allows service officers who are assembling a claim for VA benefits, such as medical care, disability compensation, and pension, to have the records and documents needed to complete the claim. This permits a claim to be prepared in what the VA considers “fully-developed” status, which in turn allows it to be completed faster.

The task of maintaining veterans’ records is greatly assisted by a state-of-the-art microfilm reader which makes it possible to pull details of a veteran’s military service directly from their discharge document, providing easily-read copies of information relevant to claims. This reader effectively uses cutting edge technology to better support Ohio’s veterans.

In terms of customer service, the ODVS Records Section received approximately 80 requests per week for copies of discharges throughout the fiscal year. Constituent contacts for assistance, inquiries, or complaints remained at a steady pace during the year, and were responded to in both a timely and professional manner.



## CONCLUSION

The Ohio Department of Veterans Services showed once again during FY 2014 that it can and will continue to perform each task set before it to the highest standards. The majority of the Department’s Columbus staff are veterans, including several combat veterans, and share a dedication and passion for the cause of serving other veterans. Everyone in ODVS can be counted on to give their utmost efforts to provide veterans and their families with the best service and support possible at the greatest value to taxpayers.

The work of the Department will always be guided by the words spoken by Abraham Lincoln and enshrined in the rotunda of the Ohio State House – “to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan.”



**“No person  
was ever honored  
for what he received.  
Honor has been  
the reward for  
what he gave.”**

*- Calvin Coolidge*