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S.B. 179
136th General Assembly

Fiscal Note & Local Impact Statement

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Version: As Reported by Senate Armed Services, Veterans and Public Safety

Primary Sponsor: Sen. Johnson

Local Impact Statement Procedure Required: Yes

Jessica Murphy, Senior Budget Analyst, and other LBO staff

Highlights

- The bill is not expected to create any additional work or costs for the Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (DRC). According to DRC the bill codifies its current practice, however certain rules and policies may need to be updated.
- Courts and certain local correctional institutions may incur initial IT setup costs for Veteran's Reentry Search Service (VRSS) integration, potential training expenses if cost-free training is unavailable, and varying administrative workload that, for some institutions and entities, may necessitate additional staffing.
- Any increase in operating costs, as outlined in the above bullet, would vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction and largely depend on current practices. Several surveyed local entities have indicated that their current practices largely align with the bill's requirements.

Detailed Analysis

The bill requires certain correctional institutions, courts, and county veterans service commissions to implement a program to verify the veteran status of inmates or individuals facing incarceration. The process requires each entity to: (1) determine necessary staffing for verification, (2) provide training on the Veteran's Reentry Search Service (VRSS), operated by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and (3) obtain cost-free VA training, or secure non-VA trainers at their own expense. In addition, verified veteran status must be documented and assistance provided, specifically by connecting veterans with veterans service commissions to apply for relevant federal, state, or local resources. The Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (DRC) and other entities, except courts, must establish and implement rules, including defining the documents that verification status must be recorded.

The magnitude of workload and related costs of this verification process for impacted entities will vary, depending on the size of the population served, potential training costs, resource allocation, staffing needs, and individual entity implementation procedures and whether those procedures are already in practice.

With respect to training, according to the Ohio Department of Veterans Services (DVS), cost-free VRSS training is readily available through the Veteran Justice Outreach Program operating from each major VA facility. DVS is not aware of scheduling challenges such as prolonged wait times to schedule this training, which typically lasts a few hours.

Correctional institutions and courts

Department of Rehabilitation and Correction

DRC anticipates no additional work or costs, as the bill codifies their existing practices. There may be some minimal one-time costs to update certain rules and policies, however.

Local jails

For jails that already engage in veteran status verification there should not be a significant fiscal impact. For those that will be required to modify their intake procedures, the Buckeye State Sheriffs' Association (BSSA) states that resource needs will correlate with jail size and intake volume. Larger jails with higher intakes will likely require more time and potentially additional personnel. Costs may also arise from adopting or updating rules.

Anecdotal information from a survey of sheriffs around the state indicate that several already appear to attempt to identify veterans in their custody. Franklin County, for instance, partners with VRSS, reporting that after the initial IT setup, ongoing verification was not burdensome. Stark County also uses VRSS and collaborates with local veterans service organizations. Delaware County, utilizing VRSS since 2017, manages weekly data uploads with existing staff (the jail coordinator), taking only a few minutes to complete.

However, the administrative workload associated with a verification program will vary for jails that do not currently use VRSS. Certain jails, like Summit County, foresee necessary updates to interface their Jail Management System (JMS) with VRSS. The frequency of required verification will also influence the administrative workload. Regarding staffing, some jails anticipate that existing personnel can absorb the new verification responsibilities, while others foresee needing additional staff, with estimated salary costs ranging from \$20,000 (part-time) to \$101,000 (full-time) annually inclusive of benefits.

County and municipal jails may also incur costs for personnel training on veteran status verification and VRSS utilization.

Local courts

Courts may also face increased expenditures for personnel training, particularly if the verification process requires a more thorough assessment of veteran status than their current procedures. The Ohio Judicial Conference indicates that while many courts identify veteran status, the bill's requirements could create an administrative burden. Staffing needs will depend on individual court procedures.

Notably, some courts, like Stark County, already employ programs that inquire about military service at booking and utilize systems like the VA's SQUARES Program.¹ Others, such as Hancock County, inquire early in the legal process and collaborate with Veterans Affairs case managers. Ottawa County provides lists of individuals to the VA for screening in their veterans' court, while Fulton County inquires at the time of a plea and during presentence investigations. These existing practices may mitigate the bill's fiscal impact, but would need to be modified to implement the verification program in accordance with the bill's requirements.

Probation departments and pretrial diversion programs will encounter similar training and staffing considerations.

Veterans service commissions

The bill permits county veterans service commissions (VSCs) to provide financial assistance to a veterans treatment court to establish and fulfill an outreach program, and may hire a person who will work at a veterans treatment court to assist the court with an outreach program. While this is permissive, other provisions of the bill may result in an increase in demand for services for VSCs from incarcerated and recently released veterans, likely leading to a greater workload and operating costs, potentially adding budgetary pressure, especially for those in rural counties with limited staff and in counties with state prisons. As noted above, however, in a number of counties, local VSCs are likely already partnering in these efforts.

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¹ SQUARES, or Status Query and Response Exchange System, is a VA web application that provides VA employees and external organizations such as homeless service community partners, law enforcement partners (police departments, sheriff departments, courts, and jails), and local, state, and federal agencies with reliable, detailed information about veteran eligibility.