



# Members Brief

An informational brief prepared by the LSC staff for members and staff of the Ohio General Assembly

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## Specialty License Plates

Specialty license plates are designated in accordance with Ohio law and promote nonprofit and social organizations or honor military service and other matters. They include logo designs that are distinctive from the design of standard license plates. To obtain a specialty license plate, a motor vehicle owner usually must pay a contribution, which is for the benefit of the organization sponsoring the license plate, and a Bureau of Motor Vehicles (BMV) administrative fee, which is \$10. The legislation enacting a specialty license plate generally designates the sponsoring organization, the contribution, and the purpose for which contributions may be spent. Specialty license plates honoring military service may be established via a program administered by the Director of Veterans Services and the Registrar of Motor Vehicles without the need for enabling legislation, and do not require payment of a contribution or BMV fee.

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### Specialty license plates

A specialty license plate is a license plate that is authorized by the General Assembly to promote a nonprofit organization, social organization, or school or to honor military service or matters of historical and societal importance. A specialty license plate displays a combination of words, logos, or other graphic artwork in addition to the words, images, and distinctive numbers and letters usually displayed on a standard license plate.<sup>1</sup> In most instances, these specialty logos and words are designed by the organization that is the sponsor of the specialty license plate. The Registrar of Motor Vehicles must approve the design. In addition to the logo and markings, a specialty plate features a six-digit combination of letters and numbers, whereas a standard license plate contains a seven-digit combination. For example, illustrated below is a sample American Red Cross specialty license plate.

<sup>1</sup> R.C. 4501.01(GGG).



Specialty license plate legislation generally designates the following information:<sup>3</sup>

- **The sponsoring organization.** A sponsoring organization is typically a nonprofit organization, school or university, or other organization that must design the logo and words (with approval from the Registrar) appearing on the specialty license plate.
- **Recipients.** Organizational specialty plates are typically open to all recipients. However, for certain license plates, only specified persons may receive the plate. For example, the Purple Heart license plate is only available to a recipient of a Purple Heart Medal.<sup>4</sup>
- **Eligible vehicles.** Specialty license plates usually are available for placement on any passenger car, noncommercial motor vehicle, recreational vehicle, or other vehicle approved by the Registrar of Motor Vehicles.
- **Contribution amount and purpose.** Many, but not all, specialty license plates require the payment of a contribution in addition to the normal fees required when registering a motor vehicle. Contributions must be used for the purpose specified in the enacting legislation. They are typically paid to the sponsoring organization for the purpose of advancing its mission. However, any recipient or purpose may be specified in the law. Contribution amounts currently range from \$10 to \$50.
- **Administrative fee.** Specialty license plates usually require payment of a \$10 Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles (BMV) administrative fee (in addition to the contribution amount) for the BMV to administer the specialty license plate. Certain military service plates do not require this fee, as discussed below.
- **Combination with special reserved license plate.** Legislation establishing a specialty license plate often specifies whether the specialty plate may be combined with a “special reserved license plate” application, which would allow the applicant to select the six-digit letter and number combination on the plate, subject to an additional \$50 fee.<sup>5</sup>
- **Issuance requirements.** Specialty license plates always require the following for the BMV to issue the plate:
  - Submission of an application;

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<sup>2</sup> See Ohio BMV, “Organizational Plates,” <https://www.bmv.ohio.gov/vr-sp-geninfo.aspx>.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, R.C. 4503.942, the Zero specialty license plate, which raises awareness of prostate cancer. See also, R.C. 4501.21 for examples of how the contributions are designated for use.

<sup>4</sup> R.C. 4503.571.

<sup>5</sup> R.C. 4503.42.

- Payment of the regular license tax, the contribution, the BMV administrative fee, and any special reserved license plate fee (if applicable); and
- Compliance with all other relevant law concerning motor vehicle registration.

Prior to issuing a specialty license plate (other than military plates), the BMV also requires a list of 150 original signatures from people who intend to buy the plate.<sup>6</sup> Signatures must be submitted to the BMV on the Petition to Establish Organizational License Plate (form BMV 4820) or on a self-created petition that includes all the information listed on the form.<sup>7</sup> In terms of timing, the petition may be completed and submitted before or after passage of legislation creating the specialty license plate.

## Drafting considerations for specialty license plates

When drafting a specialty license plate bill, the following pieces of information are helpful to consider:

1. What is the name of the sponsoring organization that will benefit from contributions received from issuing the specialty license plate?
2. How much should the contribution amount be?
3. How may the sponsoring organization use the contributions?

Eligible recipients and vehicles, the BMV administrative fee, the combination of the plate with a special reserved license plate, and issuance requirements are typically standard with each specialty license plate.

## Military specialty license plates

The Director of Veterans Services and the Registrar are responsible for establishing and maintaining a program for issuing specialty license plates recognizing military service and military honors pertaining to valor. Thus, the BMV may establish new military service specialty plates under the program without the need for enacting legislation.

Military specialty license plates established under the program are available to anyone who meets the necessary qualifications for the particular plate. They may be placed on any passenger car, noncommercial motor vehicle, recreational vehicle, or other vehicle the person owns or leases of a class approved by the Registrar. Specialty license plates honoring military service usually do not require payment of a contribution. Finally, any disabled veteran who meets certain criteria may apply for a military specialty license plate free of any registration taxes, fees, local motor vehicle tax, or other applicable fee.<sup>8</sup>

Illustrated below is a sample Bronze Star license plate signifying that the recipient has received the Bronze Star for heroic achievement, heroic service, meritorious achievement, or meritorious service in a combat zone.

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<sup>6</sup> R.C. 4503.78.

<sup>7</sup> See Ohio BMV, "Organizational Plates," <https://www.bmv.ohio.gov/vr-sp-geninfo.aspx>.

<sup>8</sup> R.C. 4503.29.



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<sup>9</sup> See Ohio BMV, “Military Plates,” <https://www.bmv.ohio.gov/vr-sp-geninfo.aspx>.