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Statement of Diane Bosak
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Committees
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Good morning Chairpersons Piccola, Baker, Dinniman and Boscola and members of the Committees and guests. Thank you for providing me an opportunity to share with you how Pennsylvania's community colleges are responding to the needs of veterans on our campuses. I am Diane Bosak, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges.

Currently, more than 2,500 veterans are enrolled in the state's 14 community colleges – the second largest enrollment across higher education sectors with the private colleges and universities having slightly higher enrollments. These students are predominately male, in the under 22 – 29 age range, and are enrolled in a variety of programs across the campuses.

Serving veterans has become a priority for our community colleges and last year, we formed a work group on veterans' issues to begin to explore opportunities to assist veterans across the 14 colleges. As we look at the numbers, the unemployment rate for our younger returning veterans is significantly higher than the overall unemployment rate and these individuals have little or no education beyond high school. Our colleges want to be in a position to reach more veterans and provide educational and training opportunities. We are working collectively as a system to share success strategies and achieve economies of scale as well as creating military-friendly campuses with interconnected statewide services that recognize the unique assets and needs that veterans bring to our system.

In addition, we are exploring possibilities to increase our on-the-ground engagement with employers in order to promote job opportunities for veterans, to improve our career advising capacity for veterans as they choose career paths, and to make real-time adjustments in courses and curriculum to ensure that training aligns with skill needs. We wish to be able to further develop choices for our student veterans to access internships, apprenticeships, and connect to mentoring opportunities in the employer community.

Many of the basic skills the employers seek, both technical and “soft skills,” are possessed by many of our veterans, and can give the veterans a head start on the acquisition of credentials that employers need and value. That is a primary reason why our colleges are launching a process for increasing the use of prior learning assessments for documenting skills that are credit-worthy at a college level. Often there is also the problem described in a recent article from the Pittsburgh Post – Gazette as “lost in translation . . . there’s a big language gap between employers, who have difficulty understanding military jargon on resumes, and vets who don’t know how to describe their teamwork, technical skills, emotional intelligence and work ethic on paper or during the interview.” A recent New York Times article (Blecker, May 24, 2012) noted the same challenge from the perspective of a Vietnam-era veteran, saying that “The value of a veteran to an employer is undeniable when you consider the soft skills developed while serving the country, but it is the translation of their hard skills to the civilian job market that poses the biggest challenge. Many employers are unfamiliar with the skills and training that veterans have. That is where veteran groups can help. Collaboration is key.”

The community colleges are looking squarely at filling the collaboration and translation gap, both with our employers and our service partners. We have recently sought a federal grant to facilitate regional coordinators who will work to establish regional networks of veteran-friendly employers and veteran-friendly community college campuses, ensuring that “veteran-friendly” is more than just a buzz word or marketing phrase but rather creates high standards and expectations for participation in the networks.

In the short term, the community colleges are focused on seeking ways to better serve veterans through:

- Assessment of skills of returning veterans, target employers for job development based on identification of employers with jobs that are best aligned with those skills;
- Promoting value or tax credits for hiring veterans to employers;
- Packaging portfolios of job-ready veterans for presentation to prospective employers;
- Providing increased follow-up services to address issues that arise following job placement, and also to provide insights that impact approach to assessment, training, and support services.

Veterans at our institutions, and I am certain it applies to all of the higher education sectors represented here today, come with different experiences and needs. While many of the colleges have Student Veterans Clubs and staff able to assist veterans, we know this is not enough. Our colleges must find ways to do more and we are exploring those possibilities through the efforts of the Veterans Work Group I mentioned previously. What we do know from our experience is this: designated staff at our colleges, preferably veterans themselves, to work solely with the veterans on our campuses to provide information and support services would fill a tremendous void.

Other specific areas we are addressing and hope to continue to refine or expand include the following:

- Partnering with the Department of Labor & Industry to determine occupations/industries that might be best suited for retraining/education of veterans and to promote those occupations. Use this partnership to develop additional bridges to businesses and industry and to develop a feeder program of appropriately trained veterans to meet hiring needs. Examples of this can be evidenced with the Bucks County Community College and their Veterans Green Jobs initiative as well as Westmoreland County Community College's efforts to reach out to veterans and provide training for jobs in Marcellus Shale.
- Developing a more intensive support/advising system to better assist veterans while in our colleges both with academic needs and benefits attainment issues. This could include statewide training of "veteran education specialists" who offer both support to veterans and develop training programs for campus faculty and staff so they are better prepared to serve the

special needs of many veterans. Critical to the veterans experience on our campuses is the interaction with faculty and staff.

- Developing a “state” leader for this effort who would coordinate campus-based efforts and who would be able to articulate programs to federal efforts and or identify other funding sources for the colleges that might allow them to better serve vets – i.e., Troops to Teachers, Helmut to Hard Hats, Vow to Hire Heroes.
- Partnering with the Pennsylvania Departments of Labor and Industry, Community and Economic Development, and Military and Veterans Affairs to assist in promoting the Returning Heroes Tax Credit and the Wounded Warrior Tax Credit federal incentive programs to employers who hire veterans.

Again, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to share the community college perspective and I am pleased to respond to any questions.