

In 1919, The American Legion was founded as a way to bring veterans together to help other veterans and their families. The American Legion, Department of Pennsylvania, is proud to be a long standing, participating partner with the Pennsylvania DMVA and other Veteran Service Organizations in providing assistance to the veterans of our commonwealth. The partnership of our organizations provides an efficient quality service and also ensures our success in meeting the goals of the VSO Grant Program and the intent of Act 66 of 2007 while keeping with the finest traditions of the American Legion. Our primary means of outreach will continue to be in the legislative offices, VHA facilities and American Legion Posts across our state. We feel, and our production results support this conclusion, that this gives us the best opportunity of servicing veterans in their home communities as efficiently as possible. Our Legislative Outreach program has proved to be a huge success and continues to be very popular with Representatives, their constituents and is a proven tool for outreach services.

On February 8, 2017, testimony was given during the Joint Information Meeting of the House and Senate Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee. A few of the recommendations of that testimony, and how we address these recommendations were:

- ***Establish representatives of VSO's presence in more local representative offices.***
 - We have established outreach opportunities with 56 offices of our state representatives. We continue to seek opportunities to be in other offices, but due to budget restraints, we have reached a near peak capacity.

- ***Increase the number of service officers in underserved areas.***
 - In order to effectively serve their constituents, representative offices are typically in areas easily accessible to veterans and are located in communities large and small throughout our commonwealth. By partnering with their offices, we are able to serve the veterans from that area efficiently and with the least amount of burden to the veteran.

- ***Increase coordination and collaboration between state departments, veteran's service organizations, and various agencies involved in veteran's life.***
 - We actively attempt to coordinate our efforts with local resources including, but not limited to:
 - County Director of Veterans Affairs of respective county for assistance in completing applications for state or county sponsored benefits.
 - Local American Legion posts that can offer assistance from their membership.
 - Food Pantry's, Utility Assistance opportunities, etc.

We seek to always honor a request for a service officer to be at a legislative office. While the lack of growth in the grant program has made this difficult at times, we are proud to say that we continue to expand our reach into areas of the state that have been under served in the past. With the proposed increase in the amount of funds available through the grant program in the coming years, we are hopeful that we will be able to continue our growth and expansion into ever more areas of the state. For each additional service officer that we can add, we have the potential for adding 12 more outreaches per month. Last year it was the legislative outreaches

that allowed us to reach many veterans and families that had never previously filed claims in the past or were unaware of benefits entitled and each of these outreaches continues to grow and attract new veterans, or veterans that have had a previous negative experience with the VA and they come to us for guidance on what to do next.

On August 10, 2011, Michael Gould, Brigadier General, Deputy Adjutant General for Veterans' Affairs published a memorandum to serve as guidance to participants of the Act 66 VSO Grant Program. There were three main recommendations in that letter:

- a) ***Identify a Target Population:*** Veterans that do not know what benefits that they have earned. While on a recent outreach at a legislative office, a veteran came to us to for the sole purpose of enrolling for VA healthcare. During the intake process, it was discovered that this was a Vietnam combat veteran with exposure to Agent Orange. He had conditions that the VA views as being connected to that exposure, we initiated a claim and he was awarded a service connected disability. The veteran has had this condition for 10+ years and had no idea that he should be getting assistance from the VA for his sacrifice. Additionally, this also makes the veterans spouse potentially eligible for benefits if/when the veteran passes away. While the above story is not common, it is by no means unique. This instance, and others like it, are why this service is vital to our veterans.
- b) ***Target Specific Interest Areas:*** By having outreaches in 58 counties, we are actively trying to reach our veterans in every part of our state. Also, our training program for the Post Service Officers, ensures that we are providing efficient access to a variety of programs administered by the state, counties and local municipalities, American Legions and other VSO's, and any other entities in their respective areas. The effectiveness of the Post Service Officer program greatly expands our reach into even the most rural areas of our state. It also allows the veteran to receive the appropriate assistance as quickly as possible.
- c) ***Establish Outreach Offices:*** We participate in an average of 78 outreaches per month. As previously discussed, these outreaches are located in Legislative offices, VA Medical Centers, Vet Centers, Legion Posts and any other location that provides us access to veterans in their home communities.

During our outreaches, we typically have a very full schedule and our service officers often schedule visits outside of the established times to accommodate veteran's needs. We form close relationships with the staffs of the respective offices that we visit, we frequently have requests for assistance from the various locations that need attention prior to our next scheduled visit. We always honor those requests and do everything that we can to assist that veteran or family. Many Legislators are asking us to increase the frequency of our visits, or are calling to request that a service officer come to their office, and when the resources are available, and we can meet the scheduling needs of the Legislator, we gladly meet that request. We have also scheduled evening outreaches to be available for veterans and/or their families that are unable to come to daytime appointments and we routinely support other events hosted by Legislators such as "Veterans Appreciation Days" and other like events that are held in their districts. It is only resources that keep us from doing more of these. During FY 15-16, we increased our monthly

average of outreach days from 39, to an average of 72 outreach days per month in FY 16-17. It is still our desire to do more.

During the past year, we implemented a new veteran data management system (VetraSpec) that enhances our mobile efforts and allows us to submit claims completely paperless from any location that has a cell phone signal.

Last year we received 3065 Rating Decisions positively affecting the quality of life for veterans and family members. The awards for those decisions totaled more than \$40 million of federal money directly invested in local economies. Over the lifetime of those veterans, this amount of the awards received will be far greater.

Our FY 18-19 plan asks for funding to maintain current operations, as well as having the resources to more adequately compensate our staff to reduce the employee turnover rate and be able to offer the most experienced and trained service officers to the veteran. In that effort, we have coordinated with the other Act 66 participants to restructure our salary system to better compensate Service Officers for the complexities required for their positions and to be able to maintain equity within the organizations in the program.

To demonstrate how committed our service organization is to this program and to our veterans, The American Legion, Department of Pennsylvania has also contributed an average of \$310,260 since FY 11-12 so that we can maintain our operations and to be able to get our services to as many communities as possible.

All of our Department Service Officers and their staffs are highly-skilled professionals who are exposed to all facets of the Veteran Advocacy mission. They receive outstanding training through our National Organization and the National Veterans Legal Services Program. Training is provided in both combined and three-tiered programs dependent on the experience level of the Service Officer.

In summary, the American Legion, Department of Pennsylvania, has continued to fully meet or exceed the requirements of Act 66 of 2007. We hope to work with the County Directors of Veterans Affairs and other Act 66 partners to ensure these veterans have access to accredited representation and we plan to continue to strive to be a leader in providing services to Veterans. We could not continue down this path towards success without the funding from Act 66 and the proposed increase will only add to our reach and effectiveness. We are very appreciative for the opportunity to fulfill our dual mission of continuing The American Legion heritage and meeting or exceeding Act 66 goals.