

Testimony
Veterans Programs and Services
Joint Informational Meeting of the
Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committees
January 24, 2018

Mr. Edgar B. Burris Jr.
Chairman, Pennsylvania State Veterans Commission

Good morning Chairpersons and members of the Senate and House Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committees.

I want to thank both committees for the opportunity to speak today in reference of the needs and care of the Veterans of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

The Pennsylvania State Veterans Commission as defined in title 51 is comprised of The Adjutant General (T.A.G.) Major General Tony Carrelli, the Deputy Adjutant General for Veterans Affairs (D.A.G.) Major General (Retired) Eric Weller, along with the State Commander, Commandant or President of the following organizations: The American Legion, American Veterans (Am Vets), Blinded Veterans Association, Catholic War Veterans of the United States of America, Disabled American Veterans, Jewish War Veterans of the United States of America, Marine Corps League, Military Order of the Purple Heart, State Association of County Directors of Veterans Affairs, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Italian American War Veterans of the United States, The Vietnam Veterans of America, American Ex-Prisoners of War, Keystone Paralyzed Veterans Association, Military Officers Association, The Korean War Veterans Association, and Four Members at Large appointed by the Governor, each whom must be a member in good and regular standing of a Pennsylvania branch, Post, Lodge or Club of a recognized national Veterans Organization active in this commonwealth with at least one being a female Veteran, and one being a Veteran from the Vietnam Era. They shall serve a term of 4 years and until a successor has been appointed by the Governor.

The State Adjutants for the American Legion, the Disabled American Veterans, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the Executive Director of Am Vets are non-voting members.

There are currently 5 committees active within the SVC.

The first is the Grants to Veteran Service Officer Programs Committee (commonly referred to as Act 66 of 2007):

They are formed to demonstrate the current use of those funds and to show why additional funds are needed to make sure that the Veterans of this Commonwealth are assured that they receive the care and benefits that they have so rightfully earned.

Pennsylvania has the 4th largest Veteran population in the Country however we are not 4th in the country when it comes to dollars awarded through both Pension and Compensation. We are 6th based on the GDX report from the VA for FY 2016. However, if you were to calculate dollars per capita Veteran population you would find that we are even lower than that. For example, Alabama by the same report has a Veteran Population of 373,761 with their pension and compensation from the VA at 2,062,094,000.

Pennsylvania with a Veteran population of 819,185 on the 2016 GDX Report has received \$2,612,747,000.

To change these statistics, we need funding authorized to hire and train additional Veterans Service officers. That is currently semi-funded thru Act 66 of 2007, which allows the service orgs to hire additional personnel. It was slated to receive additional funding through last year's budget, but was withdrawn. This program needs to be fully backed to ensure that there are sufficient trained VSO's to assist Veterans. Since its inception in 2007, looking at the VA's GDX report, there were 1,057,073 Veterans in Pennsylvania the total expenditure into PA from the VA was 2,840,523,000 with Compensation and pension being 1,167,287,000. Now looking at the VA GDX Report for FY 2016 we see that the Veteran population has decreased to 845,507 However; we saw a dramatic increase in benefits paid, total expenditure was 5,480,864,000 this is an increase of 2,640,341,000 almost doubled,

then looking at the amount that was Compensation and Pension it increased to 2,612,747,000 an increase more than double.

Since inception there has been 21,194,785 put into the program and although the Veteran population decreased the monies from the VA increased by 1.5 billion seems like a great investment to me.

The current Veteran population today is approximately 820,000. When adding dependents eligible for benefits the number of persons eligible to receive funding increases.

When you couple Grants to Veterans Service Officer Programs along with the extensive training now being given to the County Directors of Veterans Affairs thru MDVA which they also invite the service orgs to attend we have seen a huge spike. It is however not big enough because although we have the 4th largest Veterans population in the county we are far from being 4th in terms of monies received from the VA we as a Commonwealth need to invest more into getting more trained VSO's into the mix.

In addition, county code states that every county is to have a Director of Veterans Affairs Many counties struggle due to the unfunded mandates forced upon them there needs to be additional funding provided to ensure county Veterans office are also fully staffed the amount of funding that the VA currently gives to veterans of this Commonwealth would most definitely increase. It stands to reason that if we have the 4th largest Veteran population we should also have the 4th largest receipt of VA monies coming in.

Next is the By-Laws Committee:

Their function is to draft a set of By-Laws that will set forth a guideline for the Commission to use going forward. Currently there are no by-laws by which the Commission conducts business. Having these in

place will help in the future as the commission moves forward in the efforts to ensure that we are striving to represent the Veterans and their families in the best possible manner.

The Legislative Committee:

The Legislative committee is tasked with tracking current bills and reporting to the commission those that the committee thinks are most needing to be tracked and whether it is a bill that will benefit our Veterans and families, or a bill that may be seen as a detriment to their benefits and/or care as well as recommendations on items to the commission that they as a committee believe should be pushed for a bill submission.

Pensions & Relief / Grave Marking / State Military Cemetery Committee:

HB 304 Sponsored by Representative Goodman in Ref. to Section 7701 (b) and 7702 (a) of Title 51 has been submitted and referred to the Committee of Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness on Feb 3, 2017.

This recommends increasing both the Blinded Veterans Pension and the Amputee and Paralyzed Veterans pension from 150.00 dollars a month to 200.00 dollars, to take effect immediately. We would ask that this bill be passed as soon as possible to some of our Veterans who struggle with day-to-day living.

County Code authorizes the payment of 75 dollars towards the funeral bill of a deceased War Era Veteran and the like amount for the Surviving widow upon her death. County code goes on to state that it can be raised to 100.00 dollars. In looking back at death records, in my county in 1914, 50 dollars was paid, however, the cost of the burial including plot, casket and digging of the grave was less than 100 dollars. The average cost of a burial today is 10,000 dollars plus the expense of the plot and digging of the grave. County Code needs to be updated with an increase as well as the requirement for funeral

homes to notify Counties on the death of a Veteran as required in County Code Section 1912; some refuse due to the time it takes to fill out the paperwork versus the amount that is paid out and then based on code it can only be paid out to war era Veterans. Counties are required to make a report of all Veteran deaths to the Department of Military Affairs of the Commonwealth as per County Code Section 1923 Sub section g (3).

We would ask that War Era be removed, for when a Veteran went into the service they basically signed over a check to the Country, State and County of record for a price up to and including his or her life. Just because they were fortunate enough to have served during a time of peace is, there service any less valuable? As well, please consider this: all Veterans got dressed to go to the dance, not everyone went to the dance floor.

The Real Estate Tax Exemption Committee:

As discussed during the testimony last year given by Chairman John Brenner:

On the area of Property Tax Exemption currently to be eligible for this program a Veteran must be a War Era Veteran be rated 100% permanent and total or be paid at the 100% rate due to IU and meet the income guidelines. As brought to you at last year's testimony given by Chairman John Brenner, we would still like to see a constitutional change to include the surviving spouse of a service member Killed in Action (KIA). This family has given 100% to the cause of freedom and this is a small price to be paid. As well, remove the War Time Era stipulation so that any Veteran rated 100% permanent and total or IU would be able to apply for and be granted property tax exemption. We would ask that all legislators agree to let this bill go through with no attachments or riders and that it pass as a standalone bill. Lastly on RETX, make the ruling that the exemption be granted based on the date stamp on the

application and not have to wait until the following tax cycle so that all Counties apply this benefit equally.

Funding for state Veterans Homes:

With Pennsylvania having the 4th largest veteran population in the country it is inconceivable why last years proposed budget was cut. Even if the funding were to be the exact same as the year prior, it is still a cut in that, based on union contacted raises and the increased cost of health care, the funds left for care dwindle. With that dwindled amount, the same number of Veterans still need to be cared for and in all actuality the numbers are rising. Our Veteran population is getting older and more will be needing care. Many forget that without their services and sacrifices many of you would not be able to do what you are here doing today.

I thank you again for allowing me the time today to speak on the needs of our Veterans.

FY15 GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF VA EXPENDITURES (GDx)

FY16 Summary of Expenditures by State Expenditures in \$000s										
County/ Congressional District	Veteran Population*	Total Expenditure	Compensation & Pension	Construction	Education & Vocational Rehabilitation/ Employment	Loan Guaranty#	General Operating Expenses	Insurance & Indemnities	Medical Care	Unique Patients**
ADAMS	8,882	\$ 32,361	\$ 18,909	\$ -	\$ 2,617	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 477	\$ 10,358	1,559
ALLEGHENY	84,170	\$ 619,684	\$ 209,661	\$ 9,333	\$ 46,518	\$ -	\$ 22,588	\$ 8,344	\$ 323,240	21,886
ARMSTRONG	5,641	\$ 39,056	\$ 16,716	\$ -	\$ 1,517	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 297	\$ 20,526	2,156
BEAVER	14,947	\$ 75,958	\$ 37,706	\$ -	\$ 5,212	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 696	\$ 32,344	5,255
BEDFORD	3,937	\$ 27,884	\$ 13,826	\$ -	\$ 751	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 216	\$ 13,091	1,598
BERKS	24,508	\$ 130,074	\$ 66,919	\$ -	\$ 8,798	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 2,165	\$ 52,192	6,770
BLAIR	10,853	\$ 108,681	\$ 45,631	\$ 5,284	\$ 4,099	\$ -	\$ 929	\$ 700	\$ 52,037	4,800
BRADFORD	5,541	\$ 28,233	\$ 17,596	\$ -	\$ 1,274	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 198	\$ 9,165	1,738
BUCKS	35,848	\$ 157,346	\$ 97,862	\$ -	\$ 16,031	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 4,939	\$ 38,514	6,457
BUTLER	14,134	\$ 106,218	\$ 41,747	\$ -	\$ 4,970	\$ -	\$ 1,165	\$ 1,243	\$ 57,092	5,588
CAMBRIA	11,923	\$ 80,281	\$ 46,278	\$ -	\$ 4,501	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 1,050	\$ 28,451	4,248
CAMERON	544	\$ 2,971	\$ 1,700	\$ -	\$ 156	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 31	\$ 1,084	168
CARBON	5,296	\$ 33,884	\$ 21,138	\$ -	\$ 1,288	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 269	\$ 11,189	1,399
CENTRE	8,047	\$ 46,704	\$ 24,419	\$ -	\$ 10,186	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 766	\$ 11,333	2,257
CHESTER	25,304	\$ 224,648	\$ 87,968	\$ -	\$ 11,537	\$ -	\$ 1,171	\$ 3,302	\$ 120,670	7,537
CLARION	2,876	\$ 16,531	\$ 7,545	\$ -	\$ 1,011	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 124	\$ 7,851	1,271
CLEARFIELD	6,914	\$ 39,146	\$ 21,540	\$ -	\$ 1,999	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 185	\$ 15,421	2,437
CLINTON	3,148	\$ 19,724	\$ 13,272	\$ -	\$ 884	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 165	\$ 5,403	1,054
COLUMBIA	4,807	\$ 27,826	\$ 16,752	\$ -	\$ 1,681	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 320	\$ 9,073	1,305
CRAWFORD	7,180	\$ 49,830	\$ 23,230	\$ -	\$ 2,283	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 231	\$ 24,087	2,961
CUMBERLAND	20,788	\$ 109,529	\$ 66,339	\$ -	\$ 12,523	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 2,298	\$ 28,368	4,172
DAUPHIN	19,468	\$ 114,380	\$ 59,176	\$ -	\$ 9,819	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 1,516	\$ 43,869	4,973
DELAWARE	29,581	\$ 176,717	\$ 91,210	\$ -	\$ 13,036	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 3,627	\$ 68,844	6,879
ELK	2,796	\$ 14,303	\$ 7,739	\$ -	\$ 504	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 200	\$ 5,860	1,069
ERIE	21,143	\$ 169,835	\$ 71,409	\$ 4,403	\$ 9,567	\$ -	\$ 635	\$ 1,433	\$ 82,388	8,495
FAYETTE	10,311	\$ 77,273	\$ 44,863	\$ -	\$ 2,915	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 625	\$ 28,870	3,373
FOREST	620	\$ 4,187	\$ 2,138	\$ -	\$ 86	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 6	\$ 1,957	279
FRANKLIN	13,054	\$ 63,239	\$ 36,339	\$ -	\$ 4,347	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 903	\$ 21,649	2,736
FULTON	1,205	\$ 5,642	\$ 3,046	\$ -	\$ 231	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 4	\$ 2,360	284
GREENE	3,006	\$ 18,336	\$ 10,523	\$ -	\$ 769	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 136	\$ 6,908	760
HUNTINGDON	3,547	\$ 22,761	\$ 10,697	\$ -	\$ 961	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 209	\$ 10,894	1,198
INDIANA	5,928	\$ 39,769	\$ 21,995	\$ -	\$ 3,304	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 373	\$ 14,096	1,821
JEFFERSON	3,737	\$ 20,852	\$ 11,781	\$ -	\$ 926	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 194	\$ 7,951	1,263
JUNIATA	1,498	\$ 6,846	\$ 3,494	\$ -	\$ 278	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 8	\$ 3,065	397
LACKAWANNA	15,481	\$ 99,799	\$ 60,345	\$ -	\$ 5,064	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 1,849	\$ 32,541	3,569
LANCASTER	31,588	\$ 164,044	\$ 77,445	\$ -	\$ 11,825	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 2,710	\$ 72,063	8,605
LAWRENCE	7,164	\$ 42,420	\$ 21,544	\$ -	\$ 2,751	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 433	\$ 17,692	2,546
LEBANON	10,948	\$ 121,698	\$ 40,743	\$ 6,865	\$ 4,945	\$ -	\$ 4,297	\$ 492	\$ 64,356	4,700
LEHIGH	21,268	\$ 85,757	\$ 52,484	\$ -	\$ 7,628	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 1,481	\$ 24,164	3,952
LUZERNE	24,703	\$ 207,439	\$ 101,192	\$ 269	\$ 6,924	\$ -	\$ 1,053	\$ 2,116	\$ 95,884	7,508
LYCOMING	8,944	\$ 50,504	\$ 31,713	\$ -	\$ 5,049	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 903	\$ 12,839	2,624

FY07 Geographic Distribution of VA Expenditures (GDX)

PENNSYLVANIA Expenditures in \$000s										
County/ Congressional District	Veteran Population*	Total Expenditure	Compensation & Pensions	Construction	Education & Vocational Rehabilitation/ Employment	Loan Guaranty	General Operating Expenses	Insurance & Indemnities	Medical Care	Unique Patients**
ADAMS	9,115	\$ 14,097	\$ 8,058	\$ -	\$ 535	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 539	\$ 4,965	1,353
ALLEGHENY	110,038	\$ 438,688	\$ 120,732	\$ 65,036	\$ 11,490	\$ -	\$ 22,609	\$ 12,082	\$ 206,739	22,231
ARMSTRONG	6,937	\$ 22,526	\$ 8,911	\$ -	\$ 272	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 479	\$ 12,865	1,902
BEAVER	18,906	\$ 40,794	\$ 18,336	\$ -	\$ 1,129	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 1,478	\$ 19,851	5,029
BEDFORD	4,481	\$ 14,293	\$ 6,169	\$ -	\$ 233	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 206	\$ 7,685	1,610
BERKS	30,477	\$ 58,196	\$ 28,395	\$ -	\$ 1,979	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 2,276	\$ 25,547	7,245
BLAIR	12,424	\$ 52,556	\$ 18,563	\$ -	\$ 872	\$ -	\$ 884	\$ 738	\$ 31,499	5,139
BRADFORD	6,518	\$ 14,334	\$ 7,026	\$ -	\$ 292	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 503	\$ 6,513	1,850
BUCKS	50,994	\$ 72,459	\$ 40,640	\$ -	\$ 2,751	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 4,546	\$ 24,522	7,204
BUTLER	16,292	\$ 55,076	\$ 16,742	\$ 242	\$ 937	\$ -	\$ 608	\$ 1,361	\$ 35,187	5,063
CAMBRIA	14,847	\$ 41,144	\$ 20,529	\$ -	\$ 1,146	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 1,064	\$ 18,405	4,298
CAMERON	682	\$ 1,083	\$ 725	\$ -	\$ 37	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 6	\$ 315	136
CARBON	6,982	\$ 15,136	\$ 8,501	\$ -	\$ 374	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 634	\$ 5,628	1,439
CENTRE	9,657	\$ 18,076	\$ 8,223	\$ -	\$ 1,942	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 865	\$ 7,047	1,950
CHESTER	33,433	\$ 115,040	\$ 32,943	\$ 222	\$ 1,802	\$ -	\$ 1,008	\$ 4,643	\$ 74,422	7,992
CLARION	3,701	\$ 11,305	\$ 4,801	\$ -	\$ 385	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 282	\$ 5,837	1,394
CLEARFIELD	8,692	\$ 20,954	\$ 9,590	\$ -	\$ 721	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 669	\$ 9,974	2,509
CLINTON	3,765	\$ 6,446	\$ 3,392	\$ -	\$ 236	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 108	\$ 2,710	993
COLUMBIA	6,210	\$ 12,951	\$ 6,434	\$ -	\$ 573	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 421	\$ 5,523	1,571
CRAWFORD	9,221	\$ 26,233	\$ 10,235	\$ -	\$ 681	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 535	\$ 14,781	3,083
CUMBERLAND	21,771	\$ 45,772	\$ 28,989	\$ -	\$ 2,087	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 1,885	\$ 12,811	3,709
DAUPHIN	22,570	\$ 50,977	\$ 27,143	\$ -	\$ 2,175	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 2,179	\$ 19,480	4,447
DELAWARE	40,955	\$ 90,234	\$ 42,092	\$ -	\$ 2,634	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 5,266	\$ 40,242	7,466
ELK	3,396	\$ 6,677	\$ 3,453	\$ -	\$ 127	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 117	\$ 2,979	1,201
ERIE	23,910	\$ 87,515	\$ 26,461	\$ 1,570	\$ 2,461	\$ -	\$ 1,217	\$ 1,964	\$ 53,841	8,525
FAYETTE	14,328	\$ 38,382	\$ 20,845	\$ -	\$ 896	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 1,062	\$ 15,579	3,146
FOREST	800	\$ 1,878	\$ 517	\$ -	\$ 20	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 16	\$ 1,325	244
FRANKLIN	13,565	\$ 29,564	\$ 16,073	\$ -	\$ 892	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 936	\$ 11,663	2,524
FULTON	1,337	\$ 3,059	\$ 1,449	\$ -	\$ 34	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 81	\$ 1,496	289
GREENE	3,943	\$ 9,463	\$ 5,826	\$ -	\$ 202	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 155	\$ 3,279	733
HUNTINGDON	4,590	\$ 9,828	\$ 4,384	\$ -	\$ 241	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 200	\$ 5,003	943
INDIANA	7,573	\$ 18,671	\$ 9,639	\$ -	\$ 1,000	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 383	\$ 7,648	1,573