



**PENNSYLVANIA
WAR VETERANS COUNCIL,
INC.**



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TESTIMONY FOR MARCH 9, 2016

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*Presented by the Pennsylvania War Veterans Council
President Glenn Umberger, Jr.*

Good morning Chairman Vulakovich, Chairman Costa, Chairman Barrar, Chairman Sainato and all Honorable Members present. My name is Glenn Umberger, Jr., President of the Pennsylvania War Veterans Council and State Commander for the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

First, on behalf of all the veteran organizations represented on the Pennsylvania War Veterans Council, we would like to thank you for the opportunity to annually present issues to you we feel are important in the veterans' community throughout the Commonwealth. Our Council consists of leadership from the following organizations:

- The American Legion**
- AMVETS**
- Blinded Veterans Association**
- Catholic War Veterans**
- Disabled American Vets**
- Jewish War Veterans**
- Keystone Paralyzed Veterans of America**
- Marine Corps League**
- Military Officers Association of America**
- Military Order of the Cooties**

- **Military Order of the Purple Heart**
- **Navy Club USA**
- **Pennsylvania County Directors of Veterans Affairs**
- **Veterans of Foreign Wars**
- **Vietnam Veterans of America, Incorporated**

As President of the Council, I have the opportunity to preside over an organization dedicated to veteran advocacy and discussion of legislative and other matters of importance affecting veterans of all ages, and from all parts of Pennsylvania. Every organization belonging to the Council serves veterans to the best of their ability in one way or another, but the Council gives them a voice no matter their size.

First, I must report that The Pennsylvania War Veterans Council has not had adequate time to establish their 2016-2017 Legislative Agenda prior to this testimony, but never the less, there are items that remain from last year's priorities that we already know will be included in this year's agenda. We will be sure to distribute to each of you and your committees that agenda once completed and approved.

Pennsylvania veterans have paid a considerable price to serve their nation in today's all volunteer military. Thousands of Pennsylvania citizens both male and female have chosen to wear a military uniform and serve their county. For many of these veterans, the experiences and drama of war will impact them for their lifetime.

292 of our citizens paid the ultimate price for their service since the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan began. Another 1,992 have been wounded in action. Forty nine of those killed belonged to our Pennsylvania National Guard, and another 299 Guardsman were wounded in action. One third of all deployed military members have served for more than one deployment, some serving as long as 25 months in some of the most dangerous areas in the world.

Pennsylvania is the home of 697,433 veterans with wartime service, and of those, 71,289 are women. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 236,402 Pennsylvanians served in our latest wars, but our 262,637 peacetime veterans need to know their benefits just as well.

First let me begin with Governor Wolf's 2016-17 Executive Budget as announced on February 9th. Our War Council legislative

priorities every year since the beginning of Act 66 of 2007, have included an increase for funding to the Veteran Service Officer Grant Program. The Adjutant General, knowing the benefit this program has on outreach, had promised the veterans' community to seek an increase in this line item funding of \$500K in each of the next five budget years starting with FY2016-2017.

The Governor in his budget announcement took the red pen to this increase. In our minds that is just unacceptable, and we hope it is in yours too. This growth of this program is just as important as education or any other major Commonwealth program. If we are to assure today's Pennsylvania veterans receive the recognition, care and benefits they so much need and deserve, we have to take action now. This is one of the State's most successful programs; let's allow more Pennsylvanians to benefit from it through greater funding.

The Veteran Service Officer Grant program provides outreach throughout the Commonwealth every single day helping veterans with compensation, pension, healthcare, education benefits, VA home loans, insurance, vocational rehabilitation and any other veteran related issues.

Our highly skilled Veteran Service Officers are subject matter experts in veterans' law. We provide power of attorney representation to thousands of veterans annually. We submit fully developed claims that are ready to be rated by the federal VA so our veterans don't have to wait years for benefit awards.

The participating organizations provide as many Service Officers as their budgets will allow. But Service Officers in this program are much overworked with heavy caseloads, under paid by any standard, and in some cases under equipped to communicate with VA systems in rural areas.

VA Claims have become more complicated with issues like war wounds, Post Traumatic Stress, Traumatic Brain Injury, Military Sexual Trauma, hearing loss and although the VA treats veterans for a variety of issues, the top diagnoses are diseases of the musculoskeletal and connective systems, such as disorders of the back, joints or soft tissue.

These are very complicated claims to submit including primary and secondary conditions. Our State and National organizations provide excellent training opportunities to keep our Service Officers

current in an ever changing environment. We live in a time when local organizations and communities have so much to offer in helping veterans but without outreach all of these resources struggle to become known.

The year the VA processed the most claims for veterans of World War 1 was 1969, for World War II veterans it was 1980, for Vietnam and Korean veterans it was 2009. Let's not let another generation of veterans wait decades to receive the care they need today.

The wounds of war are severe and they affect every aspect of our society. We know that increases in state funding must have a bill payer attached. We feel bringing federal VA money into the economy is a bill payer.

In fact, in 2008 when the VSO Grant program began, the Federal Veterans Affairs Department compensation and pension outlay for Pennsylvania veterans stood at \$1,166,975,000. Last year that number rose to \$2,432,807,000. That's a 108% increase while at the same time the veteran population has decreased by 12%. Additionally, widows of veterans received another \$24,566,000 last

year in monetary benefits and many relied on CHAMP-VA for their healthcare needs. The veteran support system in Pennsylvania consists of State Service Officers, County Directors of Veteran Affairs in each County and the VSO Grant participants. There is no such thing as having too much outreach. Minority veterans make up approximately 21% of our veteran population. Our diverse Service Officer workforce continues to reach minority veterans, both male and female, and ensure they receive the benefits they earned by serving their country and the healthcare required to lead productive and satisfying lives.

The VSO Grant program has a proven track record of reaching veterans who never knew their entitlements which can be documented by the number of new original claims done each month. Our State would not have a statewide Outreach program if it were not for the VSO Grant participants.

Money aside, we currently have 364,352 veterans in Pennsylvania enrolled in VA Healthcare system, many of which were enrolled by the Outreach program or as a result of obtaining benefits. This enrollment takes a huge burden off the state in healthcare related costs. We ask that your committees order a study of the impact and

savings realized by the VSO Grant Program and obtain a true return on investment from the VSO Grant program so we can quit pushing increases in this program down the road.

51% of the veterans living in Pennsylvania are over the age of 65. If you really care about veterans, do it now before it's too late for these veterans to receive the benefits they have certainly earned.

On other issues, we continue to support a one-time nominal bonus for veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)/Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)/Operation New Dawn (OND), Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS), Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) and Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO).

We ask that you preserve without change or modification the Commonwealth's law concerning small dollar loans. Too many times veterans are among the many that get caught up in the debt trap of small dollar loans. The veterans' community has lead the fight to keep our veterans from falling into this cycle of debt.

The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2008 enacted the Reduced Retirement Age for Reserve Component (RC) Soldiers based on Active Duty (AD) performance.

The NDAA for 2008 reduced the retirement age for Reserve Component (RC) Soldiers from 60 to a lesser age, but not below age 50 for those who have served on Active Duty (AD) in an eligible status on or after 29 Jan 08. For qualifying service on or after 29 Jan 08, each day on that AD tour could count toward a reduction in retirement age.

The Iraq war began in March 2003. Many of our Pennsylvania National Guardsmen and women as well as other Reserve soldiers served in some of the bloodiest battles of the war in cities like Najaf and Fallujah long prior to 29 Jan 08. We veterans truly dislike when one group of warriors gets a benefit that others don't get. This injustice has lasted too long. We ask that your committees pass resolutions to our federal Pennsylvania delegation urging them to correct this long established oversight.

In closing, I would again thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. We salute the Adjutant General and his staff for all the hard work and efforts they put toward serving veterans.

When you leave this hearing today, please keep in mind that Federal Sequestration is causing a 36% reduction in the size of our

military. Pennsylvania's warriors are leaving the military and coming home in record numbers. Our programs must be fully funded, and in some cases higher funding, to give them the same level of outstanding service that they carried out while in uniform. It's the honorable, decent thing to do.

We have a moral obligation to take care of every veteran who has been injured in anyway by his or her service to our State and Nation — whether they suffer from physical, visible wounds or by battle damage we may not be able to see on the surface, but which will impact their emotional lives for many years.

Thank you for this hearing today. We also want to thank you for the service you provide to the Commonwealth as lawmakers who deeply care for and support our veterans.