



Testimony of the

Department of Military and Veterans Affairs

Senate Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee Hearing on

Services to Pennsylvania Veterans

October 25, 2021

Major General Mark Schindler

The Adjutant General - Pennsylvania

Introduction

Good morning, Chairman Stefano, Chairwoman Muth, and Senate Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee members. Thank you for the invitation to offer the administration and departments insight into coordination of Veterans services as outlined in the Senate Resolution 170 Report and to highlight our Veteran outreach programs and services. Today, I am joined by Mr. Marc Ferraro, Executive Deputy Secretary (EDS), Brigadier General (PA) Maureen Weigl, Deputy Adjutant General for Veterans Affairs (DAG- VA), and Mr. Joel Mutschler, Director Bureau of Veterans Programs, Initiatives, Reintegration, and Outreach (PIRO).

Pennsylvania's Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMVA) has a dual mission: to provide quality service to the commonwealth's Veterans and their families and oversee and support the members of the Pennsylvania National Guard (PNG). Specifically, The Office for Veterans Affairs' (OVA) mission is to provide outreach, advice, and assistance to Pennsylvania's nearly 800,000 Veterans and their families and to provide quality care to aging Veterans.

It is important to understand that the federal government creates Veterans through their service to our nation. Our responsibility is to educate and assist them in accessing and receiving the federal benefits they have earned. Additionally, we assist Pennsylvania Veterans in accessing and receiving the state benefits provided by our legislature and approved by our governor. Our goal is to identify gaps in program access and services to ensure that our commonwealth heroes and their families, who sacrificed for our state and nation, do not fall through the cracks to be left behind and forgotten. We do this through partnerships that link Veterans with needs to programs and services to meet those needs.

The General Assembly released the *Coordination of Veterans Services in Pennsylvania Report* in March of 2021, stemming from Senate Resolution 170 of 2019 which established a

legislative task force and directed the Joint State Government Commission to appoint an advisory committee of stakeholders, including Veterans, service providers, researchers, and policymakers. The Advisory Committee's recommendations to the General Assembly included establishing a statewide navigation platform to help Veterans access appropriate and necessary assistance programs. This recommendation was recognition of a problem the department had also identified. There is an abundance of resources available to Veterans from federal, state, local governments, nonprofits, and private organizations, but linking those in need with resources has proven a significant challenge. The report recognized there are many barriers to seeking care or services resulting in underutilized services. Further, the report noted that Veterans Service Organizations can often be limited in their resources and reach, hampering their ability to connect with Veterans throughout the commonwealth. The department's solution was to create PA VETConnect.

PA VETConnect

PA VETConnect is a Regional Outreach program administered by the Department's PIRO. The purpose of this community-based outreach program is to build relationships and find resources to assist Veterans and their advocates. PA VETConnect creates a community of Veteran advocates equipped to take care of our service members, Veterans, and their families (SMVF) from a holistic perspective. Our focus is serving Veterans advocates who directly engage with Veterans to meet their specific and immediate needs. We have served 1,145 Veterans and/or families through these efforts by providing direct services this past state fiscal year. Just one of the numerous success stories occurred recently when a Senator's office contacted one of our Regional Program Outreach Coordinators (RPOC) in Southeastern PA about a Veteran that had been evicted and was homeless. RPOC spoke to the Veteran, Program

Manager for the Veteran, Utility Emergency Services Fund (UESF), and the Veteran Multiservice Center, and together they were able to get the Veteran housing.

Veterans and their families face various challenges, from reintegration to civilian life following military service to aging-related concerns. There are many programs and support services Veteran advocates can leverage to address these needs. Our regional staff removes barriers to these services by uncovering resources, raising awareness, and streamlining connections to these resources. In short, our RPOCs are relationship builders.

Every region is different, with different needs, issues, concerns, and solutions. The relationships the RPOCs foster are essential to breaking down communication barriers between often-siloed systems and service categories. RPOCs also ensure that Veterans' advocates across the commonwealth are working together in service to the community. To this end, we are also facilitating Regional Advisory Board meetings. These meetings bring together a handful of notable Veteran advocates within a region to identify and discuss areas of need or gaps in service and building upon other efforts such as the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA's) Community Veteran Engagement Boards (CVEBs). Working collaboratively among all regions, we seek to develop best practices, strategies, and innovative solutions to mitigate or fix any identified shortfalls.

We are working together to integrate Veteran Service Officers (VSOs) into PA VETConnect efforts. This includes the service officers employed across all 67 counties and the approximately 55 VSOs funded through the Veterans Service Officer Grant Program (Act 66 of 2007) and other interested advocates. VSOs are among the most effective ways to connect Veterans to their benefits. Every Veteran that interfaces with our RPOCs and uses PA VETConnect is encouraged to meet with a VSO to evaluate their eligibility for federal and state

benefits. VSOs fulfill several vital roles, including outreach, case manager, navigator, and advocate to refer the Veteran to other programs and services. The department has invited all service organizations to participate in our accreditation training.

Additionally, several of our VSOs and RPOCs attend the federal outreach training provided by Veteran Service Organizations such as the American Legion. We coordinate with interested VSOs and our RPOCs through monthly coordination calls to encourage further collaboration and team building. As we continue to show the value of PA VETConnect and build trust with our partners, we expect more VSOs and Veteran advocates to integrate with PA VETConnect to meet the needs of our servicemembers, Veterans, and their families in their local or regional communities.

DMVA has only just begun implementing PA VETConnect; as you can imagine, a program of this size and scope takes time to realize to its full potential. But we already see successes. As of September 2021, we have developed and maintained relationships with government partners, on average 272 connections a month. We engaged with nonprofit organizations and community leaders on an average of 86 connections a month. During the state fiscal year 2020-21, we reached over 270,000 Veterans and their family members amid the pandemic. This regional, community-based outreach program is unique, agile, and demonstrates our commitment to leading Veteran advocacy within the commonwealth.

DMVA is always looking for input from the General Assembly on improving our many programs. We welcome further input from the advisory committee; its findings validate the need for PA VETConnect and our work toward further developing the program. We appreciate Representative Kaufer's legislation, HB 995, to establish a Veterans' Outreach and Support Network Program. We urge the Senate to amend this bill to codify PA VETConnect as a

program of record for the DMVA to provide structure, purpose, and establish a Veteran support network. The goals and objectives outlined in this bill align with the actions and functions PA VETConnect provides. We want to ensure PA VETConnect is there for Veterans well into the future.

Governor's Advisory Council for Veteran Services

On Veterans Day 2013, the Governor's Advisory Council on Veterans Services was established as Pennsylvania's first interagency cooperative approach to Veterans services. The council reviews, evaluates, and assesses state Veterans programs in collaboration with senior staff from state agencies and commissions. It increases information sharing, ensures program fidelity, coordinates complementary programs, and facilitates meaningful enhancements in service accessibility to Veterans benefits and services within Pennsylvania.

The council meets regularly to report from six individual committees addressing Aging; Homelessness; Education; Employment; Workforce Development; Health; Women Veterans; and Judiciary. Additionally, the DAG-VA meets one on one with the representatives from the other commonwealth agencies quarterly. Often the Deputy Secretaries and sometimes the Secretaries of the departments will join these meetings to update on their efforts to reach and serve Veterans. These meetings are essential to creating a government that works by synchronizing efforts and sharing information on programs that impact Veterans.

Veterans Outreach Programs (Act 66)

DMVA's Veteran Outreach Services Grant program to Veteran Service Organizations (Act 66 of 2007) is essential in assisting Veterans with applying and receiving federal and state benefits. DMVA has completed a study by the, OVA creating a caseload-capability model that helps determine how many and the locations VSOs are needed. We currently estimate that an

additional 17 VSOs will assist in bridging current gaps in services in areas where we previously identified shortfalls. We have requested funding over the next three years to fund these additional 17 VSOs through Act 66, Veteran Outreach Services Grant program. We intend to ensure that our designated PA VETConnect regions have enough VSOs to meet the increase in Veterans that need assistance in applying for the federal benefits and state programs they need. In addition to assisting Veterans in need, we encourage Veterans from every era to meet with a VSO to understand their federal and state benefits better and learn how to connect with the community and support Veteran services within their communities.

We continue to improve and adapt to better serve our Veterans' community and are engaging with stakeholders from across all sectors. PA VETConnect is the next evolution to better serve Veterans to do just that and meet the legislative intent for the Veteran Service Officer Grant Program.

Programs/Services

The DMVA, through the OVA, administers numerous programs created by the legislature to serve Pennsylvania Veterans. I will briefly provide a synopsis for each of these programs.

Veterans Temporary Assistance (VTA) has awarded \$4,566,680 to eligible Veterans and family members to address emergent financial needs since inception.

Since its beginning, Military Family Relief Assistance Program (MFRAP) has awarded \$904,921.86 to eligible service members and their families experiencing financial difficulties related to mobilization and deployments.

Amputee and Paralyzed Veterans Pension provides a monthly pension of \$150 to eligible Veterans who incurred a service-connected disability. During this past state fiscal year, the program served 2,067 Veterans.

The Blind Veterans Pension provides a monthly pension of \$150 to eligible Veterans who incurred a service-connected disability. This pension served 101 Veterans this past state fiscal year.

Educational Gratuity Program aids children of deceased honorably discharged war-time Veterans with service-connected disabilities. We awarded aid to 231 children this past state fiscal year.

The Veterans Trust Fund (VTF) provided over \$4.5M in funding to nearly 50 County Directors for Veterans Affairs Offices and over 100 charitable organizations. Through various donations, the commonwealth citizens have graciously contributed over \$10.7M to support the VTF. Currently, six commonwealth counties offer the VTF as an option for juror donations, and we hope to see this number grow.

The Disabled American Veterans Transportation Program is awarded \$336,000 per fiscal year to the Disabled American Veterans to aid Veterans requiring transportation to the United States Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Centers and their associated Community-Based Outpatient Clinics.

Veterans Mobile Outreach teams, pre-COVID-19, conducted more than 90 strategic engagements annually and contacted an average of 1,500 Veterans. Our teams are now back in the communities participating in events, as public health protocols enable.

The Military Records Request Program aids in requesting military service records and other service-related documents. We currently have more than 360,000 records within this program and process more than 1,000 requests annually.

The Burial Honors Program provides a stipend of \$150 a day to Veteran organizations that provide burial honors at the three active National Cemeteries in Pennsylvania. Since the state fiscal year 2018-19, this program has interred over 8,000 Veterans with honors.

The Disabled Veteran Real Estate Tax Exemption Program: Provides real estate tax exemption for any honorably discharged Veteran who is 100 percent permanently disabled, a resident of the commonwealth, and has a financial need. We have more than 15,000 Pennsylvania Veterans enrolled.

DMVA supports removing the war-time service requirement. The program is needs-based, and the top eligibility disqualifier is the war-time service requirement. The proposed language removes the war-time service requirement, thereby equally applying the additional program standards to all disabled Veterans.

DMVA also supports including provisions that would make the unmarried surviving spouse of a deceased servicemember who suffered service-related deaths eligible for the Real Estate Tax Exemption (RETX). Currently, when a servicemember dies while in active service, their unmarried surviving spouse is not eligible for the exemption because the USDVA never rated the servicemember as 100 percent permanent and totally disabled. Many of these Gold Star Spouses and military widows/widowers have contacted DMVA expressing frustration with this omission. Unmarried surviving spouses of Veterans who the USDVA has granted the 100 Percent disability rating are eligible for RETX, creating an unequal system. Undoing this injustice also requires a constitutional amendment to allow the unmarried surviving spouses of those who died in the line of duty or were posthumously rated 100 percent to be eligible to receive the RETX benefit.

Furthermore, DMVA supports the inclusion of language to specify that individuals eligible for Individual Unemployability payments at 100 percent for the USDVA continue to be eligible for the RETX. To qualify for the Individual Unemployability payments, a Veterans must have at least one service-connected disability rated at 60 percent or more disabling; or two or more service-connected disabilities—with at least one rated at 40 percent or more disabling; and a combined rating of 70 percent or more. The Veteran must also have documentation that verifies that the Veteran cannot hold down a steady job that can support them financially because of their service-connected disability to apply for the RETX program. These Veterans are currently eligible based upon an older interpretation of the current law. Still, we need to codify their eligibility to ensure future interpretations don't remove them from the program.

Finally, DMVA supports the proposed language to enable a Veteran residing in a Long-Term Care facility to remain eligible for RETX if the Veteran owns the residence. Without this change, a spouse who remains in the home is not eligible for the RETX program until they can apply and be accepted into the program on their own.

Pennsylvania Veterans' Registry

The Pennsylvania Veterans' Registry currently has approximately 40,000 Veterans, family members, and Veteran Advocates registered. Registrants also receive the weekly electronic DMVA Digest, can upload military discharge documents for safekeeping, and are linked to their County Director of Veterans Affairs. We recognize that the number of registrants is low compared to the nearly 800,000 Veterans in the commonwealth; we are crafting recommendations to adapt the registry to connect Veterans to programs and services using PA VETConnect. We also want all commonwealth organizations to ask the question, "have you or

an immediate family member ever served in the military?” This is a national campaign to bring awareness with the key message; State agencies may not provide referrals to servicemembers, Veterans and their families due to lack of identification. State agencies can connect service members, Veterans, and their families with local, state, and federal resources by asking the question, “Have you or a family member ever served in the military?” on all intake forms. We also encourage all those who provide services to commonwealth citizens to ask the question as well. In recent surveys, Veterans have indicated that one of the top barriers to receiving care was that they “do not feel understood by the providers who serve them.” When providers are armed with the information that they are serving a Veteran, they can link the Veteran to advocates who can use PA VETConnect to connect them and their family to any benefits and services for which they are eligible.

An area that can be improved upon is the sharing of information between state agencies. We would like to include Veteran status and era of service as a required demographic question on state forms and documents and sharing demographic information among state agencies. Pennsylvania has a decentralized approach to Veterans’ services. Each state agency has Veteran specific programs to which DMVA does not have access to related data for various reasons related to data sharing. Multiple studies have shown that additional communications with the Veterans’ community are needed. While the Veterans Registry has garnered roughly 40,000 participants, the Veteran designation on the PA Driver’s License has more than 640,000 Veterans. Sharing of this information enables increased outreach and support to our Pennsylvania Veterans

Comparison with the Other States

Pennsylvania is home to the fourth-largest Veteran population in our nation. Ours is an aging population, and our Veteran population indeed continues to both age and decline based on model projections used by the USDVA. It is important to note that while the number of Veterans may be declining, the average age of these Veterans continues to be in the age category over 65. This fact is important to highlight as we consider the needs of these older Veterans and the impact, they will have on our long-term care facilities and our State Veterans Homes. DMVA collaborates with the PA Department of Aging to ensure that we are focused on delivering services to our aging Pennsylvania Veterans and that both departments include their projected needs in strategic planning initiatives.

Rural Veterans continue to be challenging to locate and sustain contact. PA VETConnect is designed to assist with the challenges associated with building trust among our Veterans and their families and improving our ability to sustain contact. We expect even more increases in Veterans benefits received in the future as PA VETConnect expands.

Conclusion

Throughout this testimony, you'll notice I used the word "serve" and "service" numerous times. This wording is purposeful; the leadership and staff of DMVA are here to serve Veterans. We honor their service by working diligently to connect them with the benefits they've earned and the services they need. I want to thank the committee for the opportunity to testify today and look forward to working with you on efforts to better serve our Veterans. My team and I look forward to answering your questions.