

Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee

Informational Hearing on Veteran Programs

25 February 2015

Testimony of the;

Department of Military and Veterans Affairs

Office of Veterans Affairs

Deputy Adjutant General of Veterans Affairs, Jerry Beck (BG Retired)

I am honored to be here today and I am very happy to tell you that this has been the greatest job of my career – to serve PA Veterans and work with many very dedicated organizations that all have the same goal – to ensure our Veterans receive every benefit they have so rightly earned. We accomplish a lot with very little funding because the staff of the Office of Veterans Affairs, Bureau of Veterans Homes, and the support staff of DMVA work diligently on behalf of the Veterans of Pennsylvania. I am so very proud of all they do every day on behalf of our Veterans. And, finally, I am also very grateful to all of you for your support, concerns and initiatives on behalf of all our Veterans. We say in the Army, One Team One Fight. I am very happy to be a part of this Veterans Team that involves all of us in One Team, One Fight.

Today, in the interest of time, I am going to touch on just a few of the many programs available to our Veterans in the Commonwealth. Pennsylvania has the fourth largest Veteran population of the nation. With approximately 950,000 Veterans we are only behind CA, TX, and FL in the number of Veterans that call the Commonwealth home. Over 65% of our Veterans are over 55 years old. Our Veterans make up about 8% of the state population and about 9% of our Veterans are female.

Let me begin with some of the successes we have had in the Office of Veterans Affairs over the past 18 months. I chose that time period as that is the time period that I have been in this position. First and foremost is the Veterans Trust Fund. This program began before I arrived but it wasn't officially open for public donations until the Governor announced it on 11 November of 2012. Since its inception it has received over \$1.6 million in donations from the citizens of this Commonwealth, far exceeding our expectations. This averages about \$110,000 per month in donations. The VTF supports several programs: Grants to charitable organizations, County Directors of Veterans Affairs, and Veteran's

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Symposiums as well as Veterans in need of Temporary Assistance (VTA). Over the past year the VTF has granted over \$500,000 to organizations which support Veterans with mental health issues, homelessness and respite care, County Directors of Veterans Affairs to assist them in their outreach programs, and supported a Women's Veterans Symposium in Pittsburgh. Of greatest significance to this program is the Veterans in Need of Temporary Assistance. Last year the Emergency Assistance program was appropriated \$200,000 for Emergency Assistance to Veterans. This program was very restrictive and was difficult for most Veterans in need to qualify for assistance and, as a result, I could only spend \$178,000 to help veterans. Under the Veterans Trust Fund program the Veterans in Need of Temporary Assistant Program so far this year granted over \$301,000 and I have had to re-budget the program to \$550,000 because more Veterans are asking for assistance and the strict requirements for acceptance have been removed. This has been a valuable program for all of our Veterans who find themselves in financial trouble due to sudden loss of work or other financial issues.

The Veteran's designation on the driver's license has seen over 120,000 Veterans receive this designation since its inception just 11 months ago. Although the department must pay \$194,000 a year to PENNDOT for the next five years, there are many Veterans who are very pleased to have this designation on their license.

We have seen the inception of the Governor's Advisory Council for Veteran's Services. This has increased awareness across all departments of the Commonwealth of the programs and services available to Veterans. Prior to this council programs and services were all conducted in a vacuum without awareness across agencies. Now there is an opportunity for collaboration and cooperation. We have seen great strides in collaboration between many agencies and DMVA. For example, behavioral health with DHS, Financial planning with Banking and Securities, Veterans Courts with DOC, Education and Vocational planning with DOE, Unemployment programs with L&I. In addition to the collaboration

across departments, one of the primary outcomes of this committee was the publication of the Governor's Advisory Council Veterans Services Benefits Pamphlet, a fourfold pamphlet which consolidates all programs in support of Veterans. The committee is now working on finalizing a Veterans Resource book which goes into greater detail of all programs and services available to Veterans.

While less than 1% of our nation's population serves in uniform today, there are an estimated 22 Veterans who commit suicide every day. We have been working very closely with the Department of Human Services, Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services to conduct programs in support of our Veterans mental and behavioral health. We have conducted two conferences and are now conducting training on a program called Mental Health First Aid for Veterans. This program helps friends, family, neighbors, and Veterans themselves to identify the signs of suicide and offer resources to assist them. The action plan of Mental Health First Aid is to **Assess** for risk of suicide or harm, **Listen** nonjudgmentally, **Give** reassurance and information, **Encourage** appropriate professional help, **Encourage** self-help and other support strategies. These programs are being conducted in various communities in Service Organization locations and State Veterans homes to assist all Veterans. According to VA statistics, Pennsylvania has approximately 18,000 Veterans being treated for PTSD at Veterans MyVA region 1 facilities. 95% of newly referred PTSD patients are seen within 14 days.

Our Veterans Homes are the greatest benefit available to Commonwealth Veterans. Based on the ability to pay, these homes provide skilled nursing care, dementia care, and personal care for over 1500 Veterans. Our current bed limit from the USDVA is 1544 beds. We have six of these homes across the Commonwealth with a 91% fill rate. Pittsburgh and Philadelphia are always 100% full with a long waiting list. This year we began consolidating our personal care units so that we can open up more skilled nursing beds to support the need of many Veterans on our waiting lists. We have taken personal care out of the Pittsburgh home and moved them to Erie and Hollidaysburg. This will open 32 more beds for

patients with more serious needs. We will be doing the same in Philadelphia over the next year as we work to consolidate personal care residents of Philadelphia with the Southeastern Home in Spring City. This will open 41 more skilled nursing beds in Philadelphia. We are also working very closely with the Department of Aging to start a pilot Adult Day Care program in the Southeastern home.

Veteran's courts continue to be a priority and are showing success across the Commonwealth. We are now preparing to institute our 18th court out of Erie. PA leads the way in the number of courts and the conduct of these courts. We have great support from many members of our judiciary and continue to work to improve and expand these courts through many organizations such as the DOC, PCCD, and the Veteran's Justice Committee.

All of these efforts and more have assisted us in reducing homelessness, increasing Veterans' employment and training, and bringing in over \$150 million dollars in benefits to our Veterans. This amount continues to increase as we work to improve upon our outreach capabilities.

Through all of this we cannot forget our federal partners of the USDVA. The DMVA is the conduit to ensure the federal programs made available to Veterans in the Commonwealth are accessible to them. Two recent federal programs have been the Veterans' Choice Act and the increase of the number of Community Based Clinics in the Commonwealth. The Veterans Choice Act affects our Veterans in two ways, one for healthcare and the other for education. First healthcare, the VA provided what has become known as the Veterans Choice Card to all eligible Veterans. This allows any Veteran who is more than 40 miles from a VA facility or cannot get specific medical services from the VA within 30 days the opportunity to go to a local medical facility or professional for assistance. Although this sounds like a good idea, there are very few Veterans in PA that use this program simply because there are very few Veterans more than 40 miles from a VA facility and many of the professional medical services that the

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VA can't provide within 30 days take even more than 30 days outside in the local communities so the VA is finding that most Veterans are opting to continue to work through their local VA. The VA has significantly reduced the wait time at their facilities and most Veterans are now getting the services they need in a more timely fashion. Regarding education, the choice bill also changes institutional requirements for the use of the GI Bill. The Choice Act requires that all institutions accepting VA payments must charge the in state tuition rate to all Veteran attendees regardless of their state of residency. I know Representative Barrar has introduced legislation which has passed the House and is now in the Senate education committee in support of this requirement. We have until 30 June to ensure all institutions educating Veterans are in compliance with this requirement.

The VA has increased the number of Community based medical clinics in PA. They have added two new centers in Huntington and Indiana adding to the 34 that already exist in the Commonwealth. These centers augment the 10 VA Health Centers currently in the Commonwealth and help to close the gap between Veterans home of record and the location of the nearest VA medical service.

So what are some of the challenges I am now facing? One of the main challenges I have is Outreach. Outreach is the first priority of the department as we need to ensure all Veterans know the services and benefits that are available to them. Once they are aware of the benefit or service the need to know how to connect to that benefit or service and who is available to help them. There are several programs that are a part of this outreach challenge.

First, the Veterans Outreach Services. This program supports our outreach to Veterans and provides support to Veteran Services Officers from our Veteran Services Organizations out of Act 66. Six of our Service Organizations participate in this program; the American Legion, VFW, AMVETs, VVA, DAV, and MOPH. Grants in this program are solely for wages, benefits, other compensation and related personnel

costs, training provided by accredited veterans' service advocacy staff and select equipment to be used by accredited veterans service officer staff. This program has brought in over \$160million dollars in benefits to Pennsylvania Veterans in the past year. Our number one priority is to find and assist all Veterans across the Commonwealth. It is estimated that we have reached only 25-30% of the Veterans who are eligible for Veterans benefits and this is the primary program we have to reach out to the Veterans.

Secondly, marketing and outreach. Last year we were able to add two mobile outreach vans to the department. These two vans traverse the state with a mobile office that has internet capabilities and paperwork to assist a Veteran in signing up for benefits and services. They have helped significantly in improving outreach, especially in our rural areas. According to a Penn State study just concluded in 2014, outreach and communication are the most significant challenges of the department. I receive no funding to support any kind of marketing or communication program. The study concluded that we needed new methods of communication other than word of mouth. I have been working with Penn State to try and get a federally supported intern (the VA provides grants for interns) that could write and/or edit a PA Veterans magazine that could be printed and also be available on line. I would then have to find a way to cover the printing costs of such a magazine. As mentioned earlier, the majority of our Veterans are over 60 and many of them do not use the internet so a printed version would be a necessity. The department is also working on consolidation of websites into one site for Veterans that could also assist in getting the word out. We hope to establish a subscription based service where we could send out constant updates to those Veterans who sign up which will also assist us in updating our Veteran database.

The issue of a Veteran database is also an issue for OVA. The database that we have access to can only go back as far as 1995 and the contents of that database are only the files of Veterans who have filed for

benefits through our department. In order to process applications in a more timely fashion, access to the federal VA database would assist us greatly. Currently, when a Veteran is not in our database, we must request the information from the VA which takes weeks to obtain. This slows down our processing of applications for many of the programs we support. Access to this database would streamline the process significantly. I recently met with the Deputy Secretary for Benefits of the VA. She understands our issue and said she would work with the attorneys at the VA to see if they could assist. Recently Senator Toomey introduced legislation that would require all 214s of service members leaving the service be sent to the state of the home of record of the individual. Although this will be great from the initiation point forward, access to prior records is a necessity for our department.

Although the driver's license program has been a huge success it has put another huge strain on my office. This was a program that was developed without thought as to how it would be supported. Since the application procedure into DMV is a self certification process, we at OVA have to have a certification program to verify legitimate Veterans status. Unfortunately I have had to assign a person to this program. As a result I can only verify up to 10% of all applications. One possible solution to this problem is to require a DD214 with each application. Of course, this will cost more money to change the forms and procedures.

By far, my greatest challenge is one that I think many of you have been made aware of through your constituents and that is the Real Estate Tax Exemption Program. This program provides for the exemption of payment of real estate taxes for qualified disabled Veterans. We currently have 8009 Veterans on this program. This is the largest bottleneck program of my office. Since 2008 applications for this program have grown from 3007 annually to over 7900 in 2014 without any increase in complement. The RETX program is a needs based program. In addition to meeting program eligibility criteria, the claimant must also be able to show financial need.. The program is still managed by a single

employee who serves as the Program Manager and is responsible to conduct intake, develop the claim as necessary, adjudicate the claim, verify financial need, provide a recommendation to the State Veterans Commission to approve eligible requests, close out ineligible requests and provide notification to both the Veteran and the appropriate County Board for Assessment and Revision of Taxes. The claim development is a collaborative process that involves the Veteran Claimant, the USDVA, the State Veterans Commission, County offices from the county in which the Veteran resides and in some cases collaboration with other Veteran Service Organizations to gather or verify documents. On average we receive 200 claims per month, 100 new and 100 for review. The goal for processing is to reduce the processing time of this program to no more than 120 days by June of 2015. Unfortunately, at the present time it is taking over 9 months to process claims. In order to reduce this processing time other members of the OVA staff have been given additional duty tasks to work along with the program manager to process these claims. As a result, all department leaders are involved in processing claims in addition to their other duties within the office. Every member of the office of VA works through RETX applications when they have any extra time. This has reduced our processing time to 180 days. Unfortunately, without extra help, I will not be able to meet my goal of 90-120 days in June. This puts an added burden not only on the staff but also on the Veteran who is expecting to reduce his own costs from the limited funds he receives by not paying real estate taxes.

In conclusion, I thank you all for giving me this opportunity to come before you with this update. All of these programs and so much more are completed with a budget that is less than 1% of the entire state budget. This does not include capital construction projects and all programs supported by other Commonwealth agencies. With just another 1%, I could do so much more! I am now ready to answer any questions you may have.