



PENNSYLVANIA WAR VETERANS COUNCIL, INC.



Good morning to the Chairmen and Honorable Members of these committees who are present here today.

On behalf of the 14 veteran organizations represented on the council, we would like to thank you for the opportunity to present issues to you that we feel are important in the veterans' community throughout the Commonwealth.

The Pennsylvania War Veterans Council is 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. The council gives them a collective voice such as the testimony being provided to you today.

One of our main issues continues to be to aim to increase the current level of funding for the Veteran Service Officer Grant Program, known as Act 66 of 2007 and continue to seek additional funding for the program in upcoming state Fiscal Year (FY) budgets.

As many of you are aware from our previous briefings and meetings, for every dollar of investment in the Act 66 program, we recover about 77 dollars into the state in federal revenue. These dollars are, of course, part of the tax base of the Commonwealth.

The Veteran Service Officer Grant program provides Outreach throughout the Commonwealth every single day helping veterans with State and Federal benefits as well as providing advocacy on many issues related to military service. We ask the support of your committees to lead the charge to properly fund this program. You will hear more information today from a representative of The American Legion in Pennsylvania including the accomplishments of the Veteran Service Officer Grant program but also the significant impact the current state funding level has on its operations.

A professional, comprehensive study is needed of the long-range needs of veterans truly in need of state assistance for their long-term care needs, regardless of their age. We ask that the state conduct a comprehensive study on how to best achieve long-term care for veterans in need of state assistance. The study should include looking at a combination of state veterans' homes, private nursing facilities, aging-in-place programs, rehabilitative care, adult day care and hospice. We would like to remind you that Pennsylvania has the fourth oldest veteran population in the Nation. In this ever-changing world of Healthcare reform, such a study should help determine the best path forward to ensure Pennsylvania's veterans receive the respect and care they deserve.

The issue of small dollar (aka Pay Day) loans has come up at the state and national level every year for the past few years. We steadfastly maintain the preservation without change or modification of the Commonwealth's current strong law concerning such loans.

In its study of payday and car title loans, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) found that predatory lending undermines military readiness, harms the morale of troops and their families, and adds to the cost of fielding an all-volunteer fighting force.

While the national Military Lending Act's 36% interest rate cap protects active servicemembers from these predatory products, Pennsylvania's more than 800,000 veterans are not covered by the national Act, including those at risk of homelessness. Fortunately, the DOD has recognized Pennsylvania already has one of the strongest state laws in the country to guard against predatory lending, with a strict cap on fees and interest that has effectively kept high-cost payday lenders at bay. The council, as part of a large coalition, has advocated here at the Capitol Building numerous times in recent years to keep the current state law in place to protect veterans and their families and we will continue to do so.

We ask that you consider establishing state legislation which would allow sentenced veterans to apply for a post-conviction review of their sentences if Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) were incurred while serving their country. In addition, supplement the Veterans Court movement by adding the requirement that every County District Court of Common Pleas take positive steps to identify veterans appearing before them and perform professionally-approved, professionally-assessed pre-sentencing investigations for PTSD and TBI.

It was not until 1980 that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder had specific symptoms which could be reliably diagnosed and was added to the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.

As best as is known, it was not until 2007 that the Department of Veterans Affairs fielded a mandatory Traumatic Brain Injury screening protocol and the Department of Defense at that time had yet to issue a post-deployment protocol.

Therefore, many of the more than 3,000 veterans currently in the state prison system may have been convicted without the effects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) being considered during their sentencing.

We urge the State Veterans Commission or General Assembly, if the commission defers, to call for an investigation of the Real Estate Tax Exemption program to ensure it is being uniformly, fairly and equitability applied by all county taxing authorities (county, municipality, school district, other). We will subsequently recommend any needed legislation and regulatory changes required because of the findings of this investigation.

In addition, we seek a state constitutional amendment to add an eligibility to the Real Estate Tax Exemption Program. The eligibility would be for not-remarried surviving spouses of those killed in action.

Veterans Preference is applied to Pennsylvania state hiring for both Civil Service and Non-Civil Service positions. We understand legislation should be forthcoming in next few months aimed on improving and standardizing the hiring process including the hiring of veterans. It has been decentralized. In November, the state's Office of Administration started gathering the individual procedures from the agencies, and began working with Department of Military and Veterans Affairs to hone a standard approach for the veteran hiring process. The Office of Administration is also working with DMVA and the Civil Service Commission to clarify the tools and forms used to determine veteran eligibility (Ex: Forms DD214, NGB22)

We are concerned over whether Veterans Preference is being as rigorously applied to non-civil service hirings as it is to civil service. We would like to see some reporting from both systems for comparison, to include the percentages of totals, new hires, and types of positions.

In addition, we would like to convince ourselves that the non-civil service mechanism ensures veterans get appropriate preference.

Essentially, our concern is over the application of the principle that those who have risked themselves for the nation get a fair chance at competing on an equal level with their nonveteran peers.

Since we apply equal opportunity laws to all those new hires, then consider this another form of equal opportunity. We are not convinced that discrimination isn't occurring. We are also not convinced the system is working as well as it could.

Indeed, the current statute on Veterans Preference found in Title 51 needs a review for appropriateness and clarity. Also consider moving it to Title 43 (Labor) where it more appropriately belongs to ensure better awareness and compliance. This is not a military affairs issue, but a fair employment issue that involves veterans.

To conclude, we ask that increased funding be considered in support to the Veterans Transportation Network. The service provides safe and reliable transportation to Veterans who require assistance traveling to and from VA health care facilities and authorized non-VA health care appointments.

We also ask again that a state bonus be created for those who served in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars (the Global War on Terror).

Once more, we thank you for the opportunity to testify today. The Pennsylvania War Veterans Council continues to work with you to improve the lives of veterans throughout the Commonwealth.