



Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Members of the Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee

FROM: Senator Elisabeth J. Baker

DATE: June 11, 2007

SUBJECT: Public Hearing – Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee

The Senate and House Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committees will hold a **joint public hearing on Tuesday, June 12, 2007 from 9:00 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. in the Senate Majority Caucus Room, in the Main Capitol.**

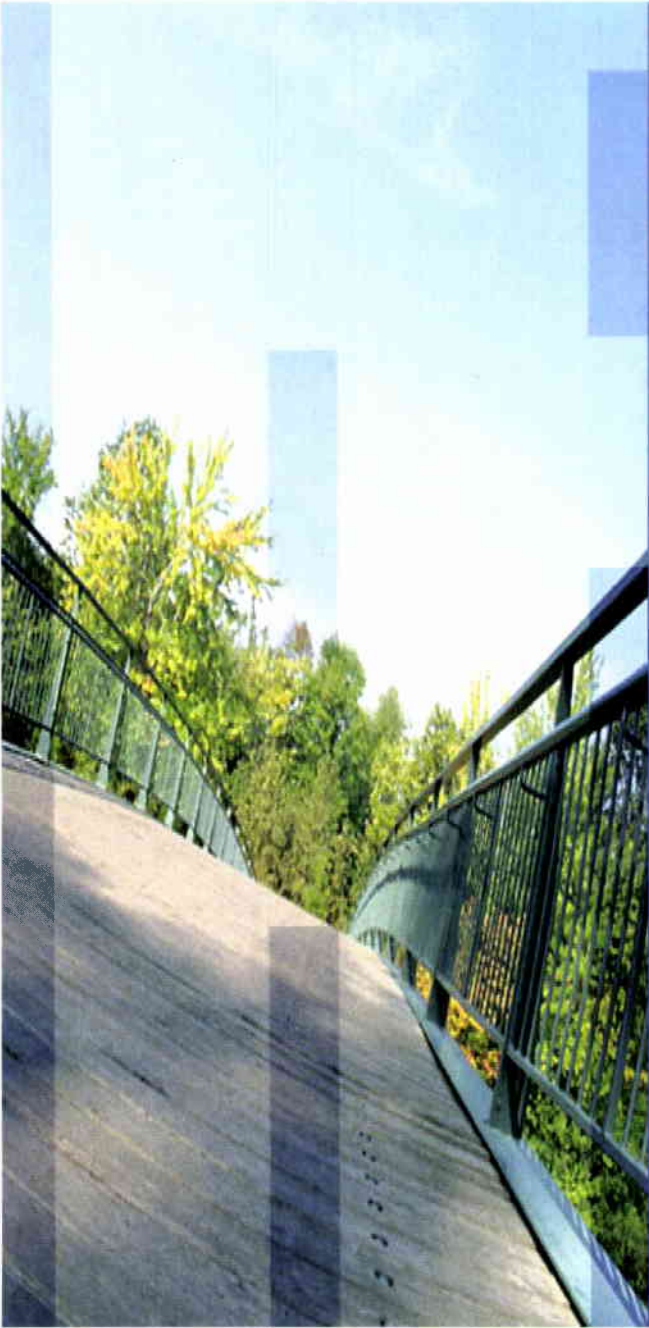
The purpose of the hearing is to consider testimony on a proposal to provide funding to sustain services and outreach to veterans provided by service officers employed by veteran service organizations including The American Legion, AMVETS, Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, and the Disabled American Veterans.

The proposal will enable these veterans' groups to keep the service officers programs staffed with Veterans' Administration certified personnel needed to provide Pennsylvania's veterans with the outreach and support that they deserve to access federal veterans' benefits. Presently, nineteen states fund service officer programs through legislation and a state appropriation.

Your participation is requested to receive testimony from the Department of Military and Veterans' Affairs and the Veterans Service Organizations.

Please contact Donna Stchur at 787-7428 to confirm your participation.

pc: Senator Dinniman, Minority Chair



Pennsylvania's Veterans' Service Organizations

**Helping Veterans to...
Bridge the Gap**

**Appropriations Request
PA Veterans Service Officers - FY 2007-2008**



Background

Problem

- Traditional role of PA Veterans' Service Organizations has been to provide and fund trained and accredited Veterans' Service Officers to represent veterans and their families.
- The goal is to assist veterans in obtaining federal veterans' services and benefits.
- More than 50 percent of the veterans receiving VA Compensation or pension benefits in Pennsylvania are represented by a Veterans' Service Organization.
- The Veterans' Service Organizations have always regarded this role as a primary mission and duty.
- The increasing number of veterans seeking benefits and decreasing resources are now risking the provision of service officers by veterans' groups.

Program

- Service Officers from veterans' organizations are currently funded through dues and fund raising projects supported by organization members.
- Collectively, the costs to the state veterans' organizations exceeds \$1.8 million annually and is taking funding away from other programs.
- Pennsylvania ranks fourth in the nation for the number of service members serving on active duty since August 1990.
- Based on most estimates, at least one in four of today's veterans returning from combat seeks VA Compensation for service connected injuries or illnesses. This is an increase over the traditional average.
- PA Veterans' Service Organizations have struggled to keep the service officer programs fully funded and staffed with trained personnel due to cost increases. Growing service demands will place a higher burden on existing service officers which could lead to staff turnover.
- With low starting salaries of \$21,500, it is very difficult to attract and to retain Veterans' Service Officers. Staff turnover means that less effective services are provided for Pennsylvania's veterans.
- Additionally, it takes several years for a new Veterans' Service Officer to become fully trained, accredited, and effective.

"This request for \$2.2m in funding equals \$2 of support for each of Pennsylvania's 1.1 million veterans."

"Every dollar secured in federal benefits...results in a reduced reliance on state benefit programs."



Request

- Pennsylvania's four service organizations – The American Legion, Pennsylvania Department of Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans and the Pennsylvania Department of American Veterans – have joined together to seek state funding for the Veterans Service Officer program.
- Adequately funding and staffing these Veterans' Service Office programs is the number one legislative priority of the Pennsylvania War Council and the State Veterans Commission for FY 2007-08.
- This issue requires immediate attention to ensure that Pennsylvania Veterans can access their veterans-related benefits at the state and federal level and can receive assistance throughout the entire application and approval process.

VSO Impact

- Pennsylvania veterans received \$1.1 billion in VA compensation and pension benefits during the federal fiscal year 2005.
- In 2004, the average annual benefit for a Pennsylvania veteran without service officer representation from a veterans group was \$4,612 compared to \$11,122 with service officer representation from a veterans group.
- The need for trained Veterans' Service Officers who understand the complexity of claims process has never been higher.

Proposal

- Each state takes a different approach to ensuring that their veterans population is aware of and receives benefits for which they are eligible.
- Many states the size of Pennsylvania employ additional veterans' service officers at the state level in addition to those provided by the veteran service organizations.
- Several states provide funding through their state veterans' affairs office to the veterans' service organizations to sustain statewide service officer efforts.
- Currently, Pennsylvania does not provide any funding to Pennsylvania's Veterans' Service Organizations in support of the service officers program.
- The first priority of the proposal is to maintain and retain the existing service officers that veterans' organizations already have in place.
- The second priority is to gain funding to reduce turnover by improving compensation levels for the veterans' groups service officers and providing administrative assistance to support claims processing.
- The third priority is to provide additional funding to support the expected increase in claims secondary to the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts.