

Statement for the  
Joint Hearing of the  
Senate Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee and House Veterans Affairs &  
Emergency Preparedness Committee

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Chairman Vulakovich, Chairman Costa, Chairman Barrar, Chairman Sainato and members of the Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committees, thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today and for including my testimony as we discuss a proportional real estate tax exemption program for Pennsylvania's disabled veterans.

My name is Michael H. Belding. I am a retired Colonel, United States Marine Corps. I believe there is no more noble a cause than serving one's country; preserving the rights and freedoms that each citizen enjoys and protecting those who cannot, or simply will not, protect themselves. Throughout nearly 27 years of military service I had the distinct pleasure of serving alongside countless extraordinary people. These men and women answered the call of the nation in its time of need. These individuals freely took an oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic and that they would well and faithfully discharge their assigned duties. That is, in many regards, the same as writing a blank check payable to the United States Government, in an amount up to and including their very lives.

Military service is a dangerous occupation. The vehicles, materials, munitions, aircraft, weather and location of operations alone make serious injury or even death an ever-present threat. The daily physical demands are jarring to the body; the mental rigors stress the mind. Compound these dangers with deployments to combat zones, the fog of war and constantly changing enemy situations, and the possibility of injury or death soars.

By Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) I was a helicopter pilot. As a helicopter pilot, my primary role in combat operations involved transporting wounded soldiers and Marines from the

battlefield to a medical facility and then throughout the medical system for further treatment or theater evacuation . Because of my experience, both on the battlefield and in garrison where I personally went through the Veteran Administration's process in determining a level of medical disability, I realize that the majority of our disabled veterans are less than 100 percent disabled.

Thanks to improved technology, more troops are surviving severe battlefield wounds than ever before. Recent data shows just 13 percent of troops injured in Iraq and Afghanistan died from the wounds they sustained, the lowest number in any conflict. While more veterans are returning home from battle, that means that more former servicemen and servicewomen are learning to live with catastrophic conditions, including severe wounds and amputations, that previous generations never before had to face.

Notwithstanding previous armed conflicts, most recently the protracted wars of Iraq and Afghanistan have taken their toll on our soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines. Wartime injuries, both physical and mental, can last a lifetime, with corrosive effects on veterans and their families. Indeed, once the initial enthusiasm surrounding a conflict passes, the United States has a less-than-spotless record in dealing with its veterans.

I believe each state or commonwealth bears some responsibility for support, treatment, and compensation for its citizens that serve their country in military service. Specifically financial support, in the way of real estate tax exemption, can significantly affect disabled veterans financial stability.

Since 1988, Chapter 89 of Title 51 (Military Affairs) of the Pennsylvania Consolidated Statutes provides certain military veterans with an exemption of real estate taxes. The current authorization requires a 100 percent permanent service-connected disability rating by the Department of Veteran's Affairs (VA). The issue is that if you are disabled at any rating other than 100 percent, you get no exemption whatsoever. This "all or nothing" approach seems unfair. I believe the current legislation falls short of supporting the majority of our disabled veterans in real estate tax relief.

Let me be more specific in my advocacy. I believe service members determined by the VA to be disabled between 50 percent and 100 percent should receive real estate tax relief proportional to the percentage of their VA rated disability. These are the service members of the all-volunteer force that have honorably served their country. These are the sons and daughters, the blood and treasure of our Pennsylvania families, who suffer with disabilities that are the result of a disease or injury incurred or aggravated during active military service. These individuals are our Commonwealth's citizens. They are neighbors, acquaintances, colleagues and family members who sacrificed for the country and deserve compensation from the Commonwealth should they meet the financial needs threshold (currently \$87,212).

I would like to acknowledge appreciation for Senator Daylin Leach's initiative in introducing Senate Bill 744 this spring and Representative Pam Snyder for mirroring that legislation in the House of Representatives with House Bill 1502 introduced August 13, 2015. I believe both of these bills have served as the origin of discussions and foundation of Senate Bill 1039 introduced last week.

These recent bills in both the House and Senate which this hearing intends to discuss, will go a long way toward showing disabled veterans that the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania appreciates and values their service and the sacrifices made to their country and that lawmakers sincerely believe in compensating Pennsylvania's disabled veterans for their sacrifices.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share my thoughts with you this morning.

Three enclosures are attached as background information:

1. Research paper from Representative Pam Snyder's office dated July 8, 2015
2. Veteran benefits by state
3. Information paper by Col Belding, dated 19 July 2015