

Testimony

Veteran Services Officer Grant Program (Act 66 of 2007)

Joint Informational Meeting of the

Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committees

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Mr. Richard C. Hamp

Director, Bureau of Programs, Initiatives, Reintegration and Outreach

Department of Military and Veterans Affairs

Good morning, Senators Vulakovich and Costa, Representatives Barrar and Sainato, Members of the Senate and House Veterans' Affairs Committees. It is my honor to be here today to discuss the exceptional work of our Veteran Service Organizations. The Veteran Service Officer Grant Program (Act 66 of 2007) has is efficient and provides our Veterans with access to accredited and experienced Veteran Service Officers. The Department of Military and Veterans Affairs along with the Veteran Services Organizations represented here today want to ensure that the approximately 894,681 Veterans within the Commonwealth receive every benefit and service to which they are entitled. This responsibility is no small task.

Pennsylvania continues to enjoy the distinction of having the fourth largest Veteran Population in the Nation. Geographically our Veterans represent a diverse population. Roughly, 40% of our Veteran population is age 70 or older while another 30% of that population is between 55 and 69 years of age. The remaining 30% of our Veterans is between the ages of 18 and 54. Nearly half of our Veterans live in or near major population centers like Philadelphia, Harrisburg, Erie and Pittsburgh while the remaining 50% reside in smaller cities, rural counties and remote local communities. Each of these geographical cohorts presents their challenges when it comes to locating and making contact with them. Communications and messaging with our Veterans remain a high priority. The ability to find and share both general and targeted information is perhaps the most effective means of encouraging our Veterans to seek information or assistance to help them understand and access benefits that they have earned. We know the value of a comprehensive and efficient Outreach capability, and we acknowledge that our delivery systems must be efficient and capable of meeting the needs of our Veterans. We must continue to find new and innovative methods to leverage people, processes, and technology that enable us to

advocate, educate and facilitate on behalf of our Veterans. We will continue to expand our ability to meet the needs of our Veterans by combining our commitment to service with a multi-faceted approach to achieve results on behalf of our Veteran heroes.

The Veteran Service Organizations who are participants in the Veteran Service Officer Grant Program are important partners in our outreach strategy. Each of the organizations who participate in the Veteran Service Officer Grant Program is encouraged to work with the Department, each other and the communities where they provide support. We encourage them to find new and innovative methods to conduct outreach to our Veterans and to provide comprehensive assistance in developing claims that result in appropriate awards for the Veteran and his family. Opportunities to do outreach are plentiful, and one of the more practical approaches has been the efforts these Veteran Service Organizations dedicate to conducting outreach in Legislative Offices. As you know, our Department has a limited ability to advertise outside of our Web presence, social media and mailings of the DMVA Digest. These Veteran Service Organizations have been able to leverage the communication capabilities of their organizations and the legislators they support to help “get the word out” about when and where their accredited Veteran Service Officers will be available. Leaders within our Veteran Service Organizations speak kindly about the hospitality they receive when conducting these outreach events and more importantly they relate that. In many cases, the legislative staffers help to facilitate scheduling and promote a professional atmosphere that is conducive to a good first impression with these Veterans. The Veteran Service Officer Outreach Program has proven to be an effective and efficient initiative. For every dollar we invest in this program, we realize \$55 in federal compensation and pension benefits returned to our Veterans.

On behalf of the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, thank you for your support to the Veteran Service Officer Grant Program. We greatly appreciate your personal commitment to allowing our accredited Veteran Service Officers to work with you in your communities.