

Senator Lisa Baker

Opening Statement – Public Hearing On Homeless Veterans

February 6, 2012

This committee has many missions: to support our uniformed protectors, to honor their service, to make sure their needs are being met. Our role is not just ceremonial and congenial – when problems come to light, we will delve into them.

In recent weeks, I have seen several stories documenting the plight of homeless veterans. In a way, whether the root cause is medical or economic or personal misjudgments, it does not matter. Our obligations to Pennsylvania's veterans do not come with an expiration date or an opt-out clause when state revenues falter.

A report from HUD pegs the number of homeless veterans at nearly 1,400 individuals in Pennsylvania alone. We understand that in many instances the homeless veteran does not fit the stereotype of someone living under a bridge or on a bench. Too many are bouncing between shelters and temporary addresses, dependent on the compassion and capacity of friends, charities, and churches.

This hearing is not about finding fault or assigning blame. It is intended to develop better solutions, in prevention up front, and in response when things go wrong.

Many very good community organizations are working to deal with the problem. We will hear about successes they have had, and their views on how to do more to help more.

Various veterans' organizations for years have pressed for added funding, so they can expand outreach and connect more veterans with services they earned. Their commitment to this mission is commendable. They know that glory comes not in documenting how much has been done for our veterans, but in finding ways to reach those who remain beyond existing services.

Some will suggest that homelessness affects individuals and families in all circumstances, and we should concentrate on general efforts. But a directed effort is neither inappropriate nor without parallel. Pennsylvania extends veterans' preference under the law in employment, provides health care in veterans' homes and hospitals, and has established veterans' courts in the justice system.

We are glad to have Pennsylvanians back from Iraq, and anticipate the day when our forces come home from Afghanistan. We have to ask whether all these new veterans will further strain services.

We greatly appreciate those who today will tell stories that are not pleasant to relate, those who will detail the difficulty of stretching services as needs increase, and those who are going above and beyond the call of duty to make sure our obligations to veterans are met.