



Pennsylvania Veterans of Foreign Wars
Testimony on Homeless Veterans

*Testimony submitted for the Pennsylvania State Senate
Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee
Hearing on February 6, 2012 about
Providing Support for Homeless Veterans*

Presented by Pennsylvania Veterans of Foreign Wars
State Commander Larry N. Reece

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Good morning Majority Committee Chair Lisa Baker, Minority Chairman Robert Robbins and other members of this Committee. I am Larry N. Reece, State Commander of the Pennsylvania Department of Veterans of Foreign Wars.

The VFW operates under the mission of “Honoring the Deceased by Helping the Living.” We do this by serving our veterans, our troops and our communities. Service is the focal point of why the VFW was created and why our mission is so important today.

On behalf of the 100,000 Pennsylvania VFW members, I am pleased to speak about why we need to take better care of our homeless veterans.

When you serve in combat there is a shared commitment to “never leave a brother or sister in arms behind.” Combat veterans will tell you that even in the midst of heated battle, knowing that your comrades will not abandon you regardless of the situation keeps you strong.

Combat veterans hold on to this commitment when we come home through camaraderie and service. I believe that this same heartfelt commitment to care for veterans should go beyond veterans organizations.

Society as a whole should share a strong commitment to providing the resources all veterans need—including homeless vets—to live independently.

Veterans organizations can only do so much with the resources and volunteers they have to assist their homeless brothers and sisters.

We support the United States Department of Veterans Affairs in its goal of eliminating homeless veterans during the next five years. We urge Governor Tom Corbett and the State Legislature to provide whatever assistance is needed to help this goal become reality.

These veterans must be given the support to secure housing, healthcare, job skills and employment opportunities.

There are a few proven State programs that help us assist homeless veterans. One of these is the Service Officer outreach made possible by Act 66 funds. We are grateful that the State has granted us money to connect more veterans with benefits that help them live fulfilling lives—including homeless veterans.

We have used grant funds to place Service Officers in areas where they can occasionally meet with homeless veterans. We are also trying to prevent homelessness by giving veterans greater access to critical support.

Our Service Officers visit numerous homeless shelters across the State. They also visit homeless assistance centers in VA facilities and Stand Down events to assist displaced veterans. In Harrisburg, one of our Service Officers visits the YWCA to support its homeless veterans program.

Having more funding for the Act 66 program will help us to increase our presence where homeless veterans gather.

Just as the Pennsylvania Lottery raises funds that support senior citizens, it's about time that our State creates a Veterans Lottery game. Proceeds could be directed to the newly created Pennsylvania Veterans Foundation to support homeless veterans and to fund more outreach Service Officers.

Our State Veterans Homes are a real asset where veterans receive the care and compassion they deserve. Perhaps there is a way to utilize these Homes to support our homeless veterans.

Veterans organizations are working hard to support their comrades who are without a home. Our State VFW Headquarters grants up to \$2,000 to numerous veterans shelters across our State and to support homeless veteran Stand Down events. Many of our VFW Posts donate clothing, personal care items and cash to provide life essentials to displaced vets.

Our VFW Post in Lebanon recently teamed with other area Posts to raise \$5,000 by sleeping in a town park overnight, selling t-shirts and taking donations. We had an outreach Service Officer there to advise homeless veterans. One veteran living out of his car insisted on us accepting his \$10 donation because he knew of other comrades who are less fortunate.

The shelters receiving our donations are always very appreciative, but their need for resources is far beyond what our organizations can provide.

These are very positive and successful support efforts, but sometimes it feels like we are using Band Aids to cover a growing wound that, quite frankly, is an embarrassment for our State and Nation.

Veterans who did so much for our nation are being lost in a system and in circumstances that leave them literally with only the clothes on their backs. We can—and we must—do more to improve their lives.

Senators, if we sent our brave soldiers into war overseas, we surely should make sure they enjoy life when they come home. They gave us our freedom. Let's give them the freedom from living on the streets.

Thank you for holding this hearing and for your service to our State. We salute your ongoing commitment to giving our veterans the dignity, care and respect that they deserve.