

**Testimony**

**Programs and concerns of the Veteran/military community**

**Joint Informational Meeting of the**

**Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committees**

**March 9, 2016**

**Department of Military and Veterans Affairs**

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**Acting Adjutant General**

**and**

**Brigadier General (Retired) Jerry Beck**

**Deputy Adjutant General for Veterans Affairs**

Good morning, Senators Vulakovich and Costa, Representatives Barrar and Sainato, Members of the Senate and House Veterans' Affairs Committees. We are honored to be here today to discuss the great work that the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs is doing on behalf of the Soldiers, Airmen, and Veterans of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. I will briefly discuss the department's missions and provide an update on the Pennsylvania National Guard (PNG) and then General Beck will discuss what we are doing for the Veterans community. We will then be available for your questions.

Before I update you on the DMVA, I want to publicly comment on the hard work and dedication of the Office of Veterans Affairs. General Beck and his staff not only administer programs for Veterans but they go beyond expectations. They are passionate about serving Veterans and their families by helping them obtain the assistance they need. I am humbled each time I am asked to preside over a ceremony, memorial, or provide comments on the heroism and valor through service and sacrifice given by our Veterans. For all those who have served or are currently serving thank you for your service and be proud of your service.

The Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMVA) is one of Pennsylvania's top ten employers with approximately 2,700 commonwealth employees and 20,000 National Guard members/federal employees in more than 90 communities statewide. DMVA fulfills its dual mission by:

- **Providing resources and assistance to Pennsylvania veterans** and their families;
  - Ensuring that all eligible Pennsylvania Veterans receive the appropriate services and benefits; and providing quality care for aging and disabled Veterans.

- **Preparing the PNG to fulfill the three missions of the National Guard.**
  - The Guard Fights America's Wars by performing worldwide combat and combat support operations, providing global reach and the projection of U.S. military power in support of national objectives.
  - We Build Global Partnerships to strengthen ties with allies and become a stronger force in alliance.
  - We Protect the Homeland, at the command of the governor, by providing trained personnel to support state and local authorities in times of natural disaster or civil strife.

The Pennsylvania National Guard (PNG) is largely funded by the U.S. government. In fact, 96% of the funding comes from the federal government. The Guard relies on federal funding and resources to supply its military equipment, to pay personnel undergoing training for federally-funded duty, and to operate weapons, vehicles, and facilities. Some of these funds are expended directly by the federal government and some go through the state under our Master Cooperative Agreement (MCA) with the National Guard Bureau.

The National Guard is the only military force shared by the state and federal governments. The Guard draws the bulk of its support from the U.S. government. The National Guard is a great value for America and is unquestionably the most cost-effective military force for our nation and our commonwealth. The Guard is a bulwark for building a stronger Pennsylvania.

Since 2001, more than 44,000 tours of duty have been performed by PNG Soldiers and Airmen in active federal service. The number demonstrates the fact that, while about 75% of our 20,000

personnel -- Army and Air -- have deployed at least once, many have deployed two or three times. Some have deployed even more often, particularly in the Air Guard, which uses a force generation model that calls for multiple deployments usually of shorter durations.

Today the PNG has fewer personnel deployed since the post-9/11 build-up and the start of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. As of December 31, 2015, we have 67 Soldiers and Airmen currently deployed in support of Federal Operations in Afghanistan, Kuwait, Iraq as well as within the continental United States. While recent deployments were at the lowest level in nearly a decade, future deployments are expected to increase significantly in the coming year.

Since 1993, we have grown a partnership with the country of Lithuania as part of the National Guard's State Partnership Program. Through this international affairs program, the PNG has opportunities to host Lithuanian personnel and to participate with other NATO countries.

The joint effort between Pennsylvania and Lithuania continues to serve the needs and demands of the Lithuanian military and its government well, exemplifying the tremendous ambitions for the development of democratic and civilian-controlled military forces.

Fulfilling our active federal service mission through overseas deployments in support of contingency operations is just part of the Guard's reach and impact. We are also on call at home to respond to domestic emergencies. Governor Wolf is the commander-in-chief of the PNG when it is not in federal service.

Just this year, Governor Wolf ordered 331 Pennsylvania National Guard Soldiers and Airmen to State Active Duty (SAD) to respond to the winter storm (Winter Storm Jonas) that affected large parts of Pennsylvania. It was neither a large deployment nor a long deployment, but it was truly gratifying for me to see how our Soldiers and Airmen can react at practically a moment's notice to help people without power or means of transportation. Since 2010, 7,658 of our National Guard personnel have spent 131,190 workdays on state active duty serving the citizens of the commonwealth in emergencies or helping our neighboring states under the Emergency Management Assistance Compact.

DMVA strives to ensure that the network of Army and Air National Guard facilities are adequate to meet existing needs, yet adaptable to future requirements. DMVA has developed and implemented a long-term plan for anticipated Armory/Readiness Center replacements, air base modernization and development of future sites through existing state and federal construction processes.

Our headquarters and primary training location is Fort Indiantown Gap. The installation recently finished first out of 48 National Guard training centers located throughout the continental U.S. and Puerto Rico with the most training man-days for fiscal year 2015. The installation trained more than 120,000 service members, federal, state, local and international personnel and had more than 700,000 man-days. A man-day is equal to one person training for one day. To illustrate, one person training on the installation for 14 days would be equal to 14 man-days whereas two people training on the installation for 14 days would be equal to 28 man-days.

After a decade at war and numerous domestic operations, today's National Guard is a modern, accessible military force that trains and performs to the same standards as its active duty counterparts. In this cost-conscious budgetary environment, the answer to an affordable defense force lies not in cutting the Guard, but in a return to our roots as a well trained and equipped, community-based, force.

We believe that the National Guard is a great value for America. According to the Reserve Forces Policy Board, the National Guard is significantly more cost effective over its lifecycle delivering capabilities at about 1/3 of the cost of the active component. Instead of being the target of cuts, the National Guard should receive additional funding and equipment because we have proven that the Guard has the capability to undertake major operational responsibilities at much lower costs than the active components.

Even as we work together to ensure continued federal funding to support for the National Guard, we must not underplay the critical role of state funding in the success of our National Guard. Our National Guard is strong today with the Army Guard in excess of 100% of its Force Structure Allowance, and the Air Guard at 95%. Serving in the Guard is a great part-time job, which offers training and educational opportunities to help our personnel achieve success in their civilian endeavors.

One of the key programs that the General Assembly provides for recruitment and retention of qualified, trainable and motivated women and men is the Educational Assistance Program Fund. This program provides grants for eligible PNG members equal to the tuition at any of the

Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency (PHEAA) approved school. This grant provides tuition for full-time students enrolled at the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) 14 universities. In addition, this fund provides a stipend for eligible PNG members by means of the Pennsylvania National Guard Medical and Health Officer Incentive Program. Act 78 of 2014, with an effective date of July 1, 2014, was enacted to recruit and retain doctors in residency and other related health professionals. Physicians, Physician Assistants and Resident Physicians will receive \$1,000 per month for up to the first 36 months of service in the Pennsylvania National Guard or first 48 months of medical residency. Behavioral Health Officers, Public Health Officers, and Environmental Science Officers can receive \$500 per month for the first 36 months of service.

During testimony before both Appropriations committees I noted that the Governor's FY 2016-17 budget requests that you appropriate \$12.5 million for this program. This is an increase request from FY 2014-15, although earlier years had been as high as \$12.8 million. The current request is necessary to ensure that we are able to offer educational assistance grants to approximately 3,300 Guard members. In light of rising tuition costs and an increasing utilization rate, we need this appropriation to continue to support this outstanding program. EAP grants are by far the most important recruiting and retention incentives that the state offers for National Guard service. The PNG maintains its excellent end strength numbers due in part to this program. Maintaining the strength of a high quality National Guard force is the key for responding to state emergencies and federal mission requirements.

We proudly assist communities of Pennsylvania and with Special State Duty, through this program we are able to provide limited support within our communities. The use of Special State Duty activities has a tremendous positive impact in communities throughout the commonwealth. In state fiscal year 2014-15, 160 Guard Members were activated to support 35 missions across Pennsylvania. In state fiscal year 2015-16 to date, 118 Guard Members have supported various communities in 26 missions. These missions include honor guard details, parade representation, special events, and community participation.

As a result of the commitment of Governor Wolf and his Administration, our agency faces the challenges of the future with the confidence that we can prevail. A stronger Pennsylvania will mean a stronger Pennsylvania National Guard, manned, equipped and capable of fulfilling all missions at home or abroad. Ultimately, we are humbled by the opportunity to work with, and serve, heroes including our Veterans, military service members and their families. I am available for any questions you may have after General Beck discusses what we are doing for our Veterans.

**Brigadier General (Retired) Jerry Beck**

**Deputy Adjutant General for Veterans Affairs**

Good Morning and thank you for the opportunity to come before you and talk about the programs and services the Commonwealth provides to our Veterans. Let me start by telling you how proud you should all be of the staff at the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, Office of Veterans Affairs (OVA), Bureau of Veterans Homes (BVH), the members of the PA War Veterans Council and State Veterans Commission and all of the Veteran Services Officers serving across the state. As a result, of all of their hard work, we have seen some great improvements in support to our Veterans. I am also very grateful to all of you for your support, concerns, and initiatives on behalf of Veterans. I am honored to be a part of this Veterans team.

I will briefly touch on some of programs and activities that the Office of Veterans Affairs is involved and highlight others. As you are all well aware, the commonwealth has close to one million Veterans; the latest number from the USDVA has our number at just over 916,000 (map by county of 939,069 attached – latest numbers we have). Our numbers decline by about 25,000 annually due to those Veterans who move from the commonwealth and those that pass away. The vast majority of our Veterans are over the age of 60.

A very important point that I would like to make to everyone is this: The programs and services we provide to our Veterans are funded by less than 1% of the current annual state budget.

Additionally, it is important to remember that Veterans are created through federal military service and the United States Department of Veterans Affairs has the responsibility to provide benefits and services to those who served. The Office of Veteran's Affairs first priority is to ensure that our Veterans are receiving the full measure of both federal and state benefits to which they are entitled.

### **Veterans Homes**

Let me begin by addressing the largest issue I have been facing over the last 18 months and that is the status of the Gino Merli Veteran's Center in Scranton. As it currently stands, the Gino Merli is operating under a provisional IV license, the lowest license permitted for the operation of a long term care facility. This licensing status is the result of Department of Health inspections since June of 2014. We currently have a consulting firm contracted by the Department of Health working with the staff at Gino Merli to assist them in returning to a regular licensing status. We expect the PA Department of Health to do another inspection sometime between now and June of this year. Just this past month, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs conducted their annual inspection and determined us to be an outstanding facility and gave us a no deficiency inspection contrary to all of the other inspections given to us by the PA Department of Health. I am confident that based on this latest review by our federal partners and the assistance of the consulting firm that Gino Merli is well on its way to full licensure. There has been a complete turnover of leadership in the home over the past 6 months and the new team has been working very closely with the consulting firm to ensure regulatory compliance.

Our other five homes continue to excel and are great locations for taking care of those Veterans in need of long term care. Our Veterans Homes are the greatest benefit available to commonwealth Veterans. Based on the ability to pay, these homes provide skilled nursing care, dementia care, and personal care for over 1500 Veterans. Of course, we are always looking for ways to improve our revenue flow within the homes. In 2015, we recovered \$3,974,765.63 in Estate Recoveries, which is an all-time record for estate recoveries.

### **Veterans Trust Fund**

The Veterans Trust Fund continues to do exceptionally well. On average, we receive approximately \$125,000 a month from citizens of the commonwealth who donate \$3 to the fund when renewing their driver's license or vehicle registration. We also receive on-line donations as well as profits from the sale of the Honoring our Veterans License Plate for both motor vehicles and motorcycles. This money is used to provide temporary assistance to Veterans in need as well as the VTF Grant program which provides \$400,000 to non-profits in support of Veterans Programs as well as \$150,000 to support outreach and other veterans services by our County Directors of Veterans' Affairs. Currently there is legislation being reviewed that would further support our Veterans in temporary need. The Veterans' Emergency Assistance program line item for this is not funded so the commonwealth provides no support to Veterans in temporary need as part of the annual budget. The new legislation would change the current definitions and regulations pertaining to Veterans in temporary need so that the eligibility of Veterans' Emergency Assistance program would be the same as the eligibility requirements through the Veterans' Temporary Assistance (VTA) grant program administered through the VTF. If this is

passed, we will be asking for at least a \$200,000 appropriation to support Veterans Temporary Assistance so that VTF funding could be used for the grant programs. Last year we granted almost \$800,000 to Veterans. Currently we are reviewing over \$3.3 million in requests for grants from the VTF in which we have only \$400K to allocate. The more money available enables us to grant more financial assistance programs and services provided by non-profit organizations.

### **Military Family Relief Assistance Program**

Another program designed to assist service members and their families in temporary need is the Military Family Relief and Assistance Program (MFRAP). This program is designed to assist service members and their families as they transition to civilian life many of which are Veterans. The program is funded by citizens who donate their Pennsylvania state income tax refund to the program. This year, so far, we have received \$8,486.88 in donations and have awarded 22 Veterans and their families \$67,976.00 in support. The current balance of the MFRAP is \$888,338.40.

### **Real Estate Tax Program**

On October 26, 2015, there was a joint hearing of the House and Senate VAEP Committees. The purpose of this joint hearing was to review seven (7) bills that would affect the Disabled Veterans' Real Estate Tax Exemption Program. The joint hearing was to evaluate a proportional methodology to include more Veterans in the eligibility for property tax exemption. The Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMVA) stated that although the tax exemption program can use some improvements it needs further study to evaluate program needs. Our Department continues to work with the State Veterans Commission to improve this program.

Since the October testimony, DMVA has spent significant time researching similar programs in other States and examined how they apply their methodologies. Pennsylvania is one of the few states that offer a 100% tax exemption regardless of assessed value of the property. The most common methodology is that a dollar limit is associated with each benefit tier. If a State uses a proportional system then the max benefit may be capped at a dollar amount (\$5,000 for example) and then the appropriate percentage is applied to that number. In all instances, the 100% disabled Veteran receives complete relief from property taxes whereas proportionally disabled Veterans receive limits. The majority of the members of the State Veterans Commission support a proportional property tax relief program for Veterans based on disability rating. I have spoken with the Executive Director of the County Commissioners about the costs of this program. No one keeps records on the costs of this program for the counties. As such, he could not give me an estimate of the cost to change the current property tax exemption program nor could he tell me what the current program costs. I have provided you with a depiction by county of the number of Veterans who currently receive property tax exemption attached to this testimony. Of course, this number will increase exponentially if those Veterans with 10-90% disability rating are included.

We believe that the most equitable way to increase service to Veterans is to implement a system to continue to serve those that have been rated at the 100% disabled by exempting 100% of their assessed taxes so long as all the eligibility requirements are met for the program. There has been substantial discussion of further changes to this program such as the proportional disability program. I would propose that the State Veterans Commission and this department present their final recommendation for all changes to this program to the committees no later than 30 June of

this year for your consideration. This will give the commission and my office time to further consider all proposals and come to the committees with a consensus on the program they deem the most beneficial.

However, there is one issue in the RETX program in most need of correcting and that is the provision that states a claimant must be rated total or 100% permanently disabled by the USDVA prior to death. Although on the surface this is a logical provision, it eliminates those surviving spouses that are left behind after a service member is killed in action (KIA) from receiving this benefit. All members of the State Veterans Commission and this department feel that these are the families most in need and that by requiring a rating prior to death we have forgotten those that have made the ultimate sacrifice for our freedom. Regardless of what bills move forward we respectfully ask that amendments include provisions of eligibility of the surviving spouse for those KIA as soon as possible.

During the past year we have placed a concentrated effort toward reducing the nearly 12 month old backlog that has plagued this program for several years. This was no easy task and it required the full support and participation of the OVA staff. We required our program personnel to be trained to adjudicate RETX claims, accept the additional workflow and every member of the management staff participated in the adjudication process. We effectively added the equivalent of 3 full time personnel to this effort. The results have been remarkable and we are now adjudicating claims within 120 days of receipt. Unfortunately, we cannot continue to sustain this level of effort indefinitely and we desperately need the increased compliment to finally "right size" our Programs and Services teams to properly serve our Veterans. Three

positions were in the 15/16 budget but are now in the supplemental and we are waiting for release of that supplemental to hire these positions. The request for these positions is also included in the Governor's 2016 Budget proposal.

### **Veterans Outreach**

Since coming to this position almost three years ago, my priority has been outreach. As military members leave active duty and return to communities within the commonwealth, the transition to civilian life and identification of services and benefits can be daunting. Our Veterans need assistance in gaining access to employment opportunities, education benefits, healthcare services, transportation, family reintegration services and counseling. Gaining access to these services can be challenging. Roughly one third of our Veteran population is age 65 and older, while another third of that population is between 55 and 65 years of age. The remaining one third of our Veterans are between the ages of 18 and 54. Older Veterans are typically receiving care for more than one chronic illness that requires medical care and support from a caregiver or healthcare provider. For our Veterans who live in rural Pennsylvania, finding caregiver support or transportation to a VA health care facility can be a real challenge. With only three active duty military bases, all located in southcentral Pennsylvania, the majority of Pennsylvania veterans lack the resources found on active duty posts. The Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veterans Affairs relies on its Outreach and Reintegration Division to identify and assist these Veterans in gaining access to the benefits, programs and services they have earned. The Department of Military and Veterans Affairs is committed to leveraging people, process and technology to advocate, educate and facilitate on behalf of our Veterans. Pooling resources and opportunities through increased Veteran Service Officer presence within statewide armory

facilities, family action centers, employment centers, educational institutions, and mobile outreach units. These outreach initiatives are instrumental in making sure Veteran services and assistance are more accessible than ever. It is imperative that we continue to invest in outreach through a multi-faceted approach; this investment is key to connecting Veterans to services in every county of our commonwealth.

One of the main outreach programs administered by the Office of Veterans Affairs is the Veteran Service Officer Grant program, also known as Act 66 of 2007. This program provides funding to train and sustain accredited Veteran Service Officers within the recognized Veterans Service Organizations to serve and assist Pennsylvania Veterans with filing claims for VA Benefits and Pension. Our return on investment is roughly \$103/1 over the life of the program. This program has demonstrated long-term success but it is constrained by limited funding. It is difficult to retain trained and experienced Veteran Service Officers. This budget cycle this program remains level funded. However, we are committed to seeking additional funding for this vital program. Additional investments to this program will significantly impact the number of Veterans we serve and also result in increased annual revenue from new benefits awards. I ask your support as we attempt to grow this funding so necessary to achieve our outreach goals.

The Department of Military and Veterans Affairs has been the repository for the states copy of discharge records (DD-214) since 1995. In 2015, thanks to legislation initiated by Senator Toomey, our Department began working with the department of Defense to receive DD-214's electronically as service members leave active duty. We now have over 263,499 DD-214's stored electronically allowing us to provide a copy to Veterans free of charge any time they may

need a copy of their discharge. Common uses are for obtaining a passport, applying for VA Benefits, Applying for a VA Home loan or to receive their final honors prior to interment.

As we look for ways to expand our services we are aware that many state agencies under the jurisdiction of the Governor collect DD-214's for a variety of programs which require an honorable discharge. Once the agency is done with the discharge documents, it is often shredded because of the sensitive nature of the document. It is DMVA's desire to be the repository for all DD-214's once our fellow commonwealth agencies are done determining eligibility for their individual programs. We seek your consideration in designating the Department as the official repository for military discharge documents, Records of Military Service for the commonwealth. Therefore, each Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Department or Agency that uses, gathers, stores or otherwise relies on the DD-214's to verify Veteran Status or program eligibility be required to forward the original document, at no additional cost, for inclusion in the repository.

DMVA is the lead agency for Veterans advocacy and we are the first place that veterans turn when they have questions about the benefits and services for which they may be eligible. By mandating DMVA to be the official repository for discharge documents Veterans will be better served by the commonwealth.

### **DMVA Information Technology Initiatives**

DMVA is taking steps to enhance our collaborative communication capabilities and to comply with the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA) partners Digits to Digits automation program. This is a multi-year project that we launched in mid-December and will

continue for a few more years to complete development. The Veterans Registry was launched in mid-December 2015. We worked closely with the State Office of Administration, Bureau of Information Technology to define the early requirements and provision the registry for long term change management within the Office of Administration –Bureau of Information Technology (OA-BIT) Initiatives. The registry is designed to encourage Veteran self-registration to a list serve that captures a defined set of demographical data, allow the Veteran to request information on Benefits, Services and Programs, provide for open text comment and it allows the Veteran to elect to receive routine correspondence and Veteran information from the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMVA) . From this early phase we plan to expand the Veteran Registry to include inter-agency referrals, referrals to community partners, non-profit organizations and other Veteran friendly institutions as necessary to meet the needs of our Veterans and their families.

There is funding in the supplemental budget for Phase 2 of this project which our Unified Claims Management Project is also known as Digit 2 Digit (D2D). D2D is a comprehensive automation initiative that will provide a common access point for DMVA service officers, county directors, and VSOs to standardize, centralize, and integrate the universal collection of Benefits Claim Forms and supporting evidentiary data needed to produce a streamlined, paperless Veteran/Service member-centric claims process. This initiative will create a statewide solution for claims management allowing for more integrated services among existing programs of the commonwealth and counties.

We currently have a Veteran Newsletter now available on our website. When a Veteran registers in the Veteran Registry they can sign up to receive the newsletter electronically. The newsletter is filled with Veteran information and resources. Additionally, there is an online Veteran Donation site, which can accept secure online donations in support of our Veterans Trust Fund and the Military Families Relief and Assistance Program.

### **Veteran's Homelessness**

The Department of Military and Veterans' Affairs, Office of Veterans Affairs, as a part of our efforts to reduce Veteran's homelessness collaborated with the Governor's Office and various agencies across the commonwealth in support of The Mayors/Governor's Challenge to reduce homelessness among Veterans. Through this initiative, Governors, Mayors and other state and local leaders across the country marshalled Federal, State, local and nonprofit efforts to end homelessness among Veteran in their communities. Ending homelessness means reaching the point where there are no Veterans sleeping on streets and every Veteran has access to permanent housing, also known as functional zero.

Non-profits and federal agencies across the commonwealth receive funding to reduce Veteran homelessness through various programs. Last year the Commonwealth received 13.7 million federal dollars from the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program. This program was established in 2011 to promote housing stability among homeless and at-risk Veterans and their families. Under this program, the VA awards grants to private non-profit organizations and consumer cooperatives that can provide a range of supportive services to eligible very low-income Veteran families.

Governor Wolf challenged communities across the commonwealth, in collaboration with the Mayor's Challenge, to permanently house 550 homeless Veterans in the last 100 days of 2015. On 22 September the challenge began signifying 100 days remaining in 2015 to accomplish this challenge. The challenge ended on 31 December with great success. During this challenge over 600 Veterans were permanently housed across the commonwealth in 100 days and since the end of that challenge an additional 267 Veterans were permanently housed. Several cities within the Commonwealth declared functional zero in their cities; Philadelphia, Lancaster, York, and Reading. Pittsburgh is completing the paperwork to declare functional zero as well. Across the Commonwealth over 2,500 Veterans were housed in 2015. Reaching functional zero is a very difficult goal and we will continue to work with our communities to reduce Veteran Homelessness.

### **Veteran Wellness**

The Department of Military and Veterans Affairs works closely with our partners to lead advocacy initiatives to establish a Veteran Wellness Program that meets the emerging needs of our Veterans and their families. Wellness programs are tailored to the specific physical and behavioral health needs of our Veterans while also focusing on regional factors that can impact our approach. By leveraging community resources, we can develop and strengthen a sense of community between our military families and the communities. We work closely with our USDVA partners, Department of Human Services-Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (DHS-OMHSAS), Department of Corrections, other commonwealth agencies and community partners to develop a comprehensive, Veteran Centric and community based

approach. With funding support from the Department of Human Services Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, we collaborated to bring Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) for Veterans and their families into community settings. MHFA is an 8-hour training by and for service members, Veterans and their families and offers participants with a proven combination of information and techniques to recognize and respond to the warning signs of mental illness and addiction. Our partnership includes DHS-OMHSAS, our Veteran Service Organizations and various Community Partners. Last year we sponsored two MHFA Trainer Certification courses early in the year which resulted in the certification of 37 new MHFA instructors throughout the commonwealth. Our new instructors have delivered 3 MHFA trainings that resulted in a total of 86 individuals who received training as Mental Health First Responders. The success of these training opportunities demonstrates a clear need to continue this effort. As we move forward, we are planning an additional three sessions before the end of this fiscal year.

In June 2015, OMHSAS sponsored training in conjunction with Drexel University and DMVA at three regional trainings across PA for community clinicians on Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT). A total of 66 mental health clinicians were trained. CPT is an evidence-based training that focuses on treating Veterans with PTSD. The training involves a 2-day live session provided by a CPT trainer and consultant, and weekly one-hour telephone case consultations for a period of 6 months. Beginning in January/February of 2016, approximately 40 community clinicians from across PA will be certified to provide CPT treatment to Veterans with PTSD. The names of the CPT certified community clinicians will be listed on the CPT registry and the OMHSAS PA Recovery and Resiliency website.

Our Veteran's Jail Diversion program continues to show progress. In FY 2015-16 SAMHSA grant funds (\$335,000 has been allocated) are being used to expand the number of counties involved in diverting Veterans with trauma-related mental health and/or substance use disorders from the criminal justice system. The grant involves collaboration/partnership between OMHSAS/PCCD/DMVA, and each grantee has/or will receive augmentation funding. The grants were awarded to the following counties:

- Cambria County—Implemented a Veterans Treatment Court expansion program
- Delaware County—Implemented a Veterans Diversion Program, which included Outreach to Veterans, MHFA and CIT for Veterans trainings
- Erie/Warren/Crawford Counties—Provided regional MHFA trainings for police and first responders likely to interface with Veterans in crisis
- Philadelphia—Implemented a jail based Vets trauma/PTSD pilot program to provide trauma services to Veterans
- Lackawanna County—Implemented a Veterans Court expansion program to provide behavioral health services and supports to Veterans families

Our Veterans Courts continue to demonstrate success in the 18 counties where they have been established. Part of the grants being awarded by the Veterans Trust Fund to county directors is to support Veterans Courts.

## **Conclusion**

I've probably taken up more time than I was supposed to already but I will tell you I could talk about Veterans programs with you all afternoon. There are still many things that I did not touch

upon. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to serve the Commonwealth's Veterans. For me it has been the greatest honor of my career to be an advocate for all of those who have served our Commonwealth and Nation. Thank you all also for the great support you give to us throughout the year. Many of you have accepted invitations to attend State Veterans Commission Meetings and visit our State Homes. I especially would like to again invite you to visit the Veterans in the State Veterans Homes so that you can see first-hand the great care our health professional and support staff are providing. Thanks for giving me the opportunity to address this combined meeting of the Veterans Affairs Emergency Preparedness Committee. We are prepared to answer your questions.