

Good afternoon to the Chairmen and Honorable Members of these committees who are present here today. My name is Keith Beebe, Lieutenant Colonel, U.S. Army, Retired and Chairman of the Legislative Committee of the Pennsylvania War Veterans Council.

First, on behalf of the 15 veteran organizations represented on the Pennsylvania War Veterans Council, we would like to thank you for the opportunity to present issues to you that we feel are important in the veterans' community throughout the Commonwealth.

The Pennsylvania War Veterans Council is an organization dedicated to Veteran Advocacy and discussion of legislative and other matters of importance affecting veterans of all ages and from all parts of Pennsylvania. Every organization belonging to the Council serves veterans to the best of their ability. The Council gives them a collective voice.

Let me begin the highlighting of our current veterans' issues with Governor Wolf's 2017-18 Executive Budget. Our War Council's Legislative priorities every year since the Rendell Administration have included an increase for funding to the Veteran Service Officer Grant Program, known as Act 66 of 2007.

The Adjutant General knowing the benefit this program has on Outreach had promised the veterans community to seek an increase in this line item funding of \$500K in each of the next few budget years starting with FY2016-2017.

The Veteran Service Officer Grant program provides Outreach throughout the Commonwealth every single day helping veterans with State and Federal benefits as well as providing advocacy on many issues related to military service. We ask the support of your committees to lead the charge to properly fund this program.

We are aware of the potential introduction of a bill establishing a Veterans Lottery Ticket. It would be dedicated to assisting our elderly veteran population throughout the state. We would support such legislation.

As you may recall your Committees ordered a study be conducted in 2009 regarding the need for additional state veteran's homes. That study conducted by The First Chesapeake Group published their report on March 31, 2009. The study recommended three additional homes be built, one in the Northcentral region, one in the southcentral region and one in the Lehigh Valley.

We would like to remind you that Pennsylvania has the fourth oldest veteran population in the Nation. We have therefore expanded this War Council's veterans' issue of concern to include providing a suitable alternative to improve the state system of caring for aging veterans. In this ever-changing world of Healthcare reform, we would like to work with you to immediately resolve this issue and ensure veterans receive the respect and care they deserve.

The State Veterans Commission and the Pennsylvania War Veterans Council along with many of the individual Organizations have long adopted resolutions against any change to Pennsylvania's current strong law that protects veterans from the grasp of Payday Lending. The last session included the introduction of Senate Bill 1379 that wanted to legalize a new product called the Financial Services Credit Ladder. It did not make it through the session. The bill cited the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) proposals as a model legislation but failed to mention that, unlike Pennsylvania, the CFPB cannot set a limit on the cost of lending. To date, the bill has not been re-introduced into this year's session, but we are hearing it may be. If so, we ask that you not support it.

Since the Civil War, Pennsylvania has paid a wartime bonus to those who have served. We know this process starts over multiple years and must go on the ballot for approval. We understand that the Persian Gulf War Bonus is still in effect but based on reports provided to the State Veterans Commission the Persian Gulf Bonus has almost reached its full potential.

We need to start the process for our next group of warriors. With multiple deployments to differing theaters of operations and what seems like a war that will never end, it's time we started the process. If you consider that an 18-year-old warrior who was part of the Invasion of Afghanistan in Oct 2001 would be 34 years old today, it's time we recognized his or her devotion and sacrifice. Many of our National Guard and Reserve Soldiers who so willingly went to war were much older than their active duty counterparts. With Pennsylvania warriors still on the battlefield today it may be many years before we bring them all home but let's start the process now for those that served the early years. We ask that a state bonus be created to recognize service in the Global War on Terrorism.

You specifically asked our testimony to include comment on the Disabled Veterans Real Estate Tax Exemption Program. The State Veterans Commission recommended the definition of need for the current program and any future program be based on household income. The War Council recommends that the wartime service clause in the state Constitution be eliminated. We also recommend a geographically based determination of tax relief. For example, the standard for Philadelphia County would not work for McKean County. We support a Constitutional amendment granting eligibility to the surviving spouse of a service member Killed in Action. The War Council is adamant that Act 161 of 2006 be repealed because it overrules the Constitution which says the State Veterans Commission determines need.

The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2008 enacted the Reduced Retirement Age for Reserve Component (RC) Soldiers based upon the time they were deployed on Active Duty on or after 29 January 08. The War Council supports amending the NDAA to include service prior to that date. The Iraq war began in March 2003. Many of our Pennsylvania National Guardsman and women as well as other Reserve soldiers served in some of the

bloodiest battles of the war in cities like Najaf and Fallujah long prior to 29 Jan 08. Therefore, we strongly urge that your committees pass a Resolution to our Congressional Pennsylvania delegation urging them to correct this long-established oversight.

In addition to the issues I have just described, there is another that could occur we feel the Pennsylvania War Veterans Council should comment on. This concerns the proposed appointment of Members-at-Large to the State Veterans Commission. A list of individuals has been sent to the Governor. The War Council, in support of the State Veterans Commission, is requesting that the Governor suspend the appointment of any new Members-at-Large to the commission until the process of recommendation and selection can be reviewed.

In closing, I would again thank you for the opportunity to testify today. We salute both the Adjutant General and his new Deputy for Veterans Affairs and look forward to working together to improve the lives of veterans throughout the Commonwealth.