

**Testimony**  
**Veterans Programs and Services**  
**Joint Informational Meeting of the**  
**Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committees**  
**March 23, 2017**

**Department of Military and Veterans Affairs**

**Brigadier General Anthony J. Carrelli**

**The Adjutant General**

**and**

**Major General (USAF Retired) Eric Weller**

**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 exceptional work that the staff at Department of Military and Veterans Affairs is doing on behalf of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for our Veterans, service members and their families. I also want to thank the other panel members testifying today the War Veterans Council, State Veterans Commission and Veteran Service Organizations and their members epitomize Veterans serving Veterans. Our County Directors of Veteran Affairs and other certified Veteran Services Officers with the Veteran Service Organizations are incredible partners. They are force multipliers for us in connecting Veterans with the resources where they are across the entire Commonwealth.

The United States Department of Veterans Affairs, specifically, our region VISN 4 Director in his testimony describes our partnership and how we interact together to serve the Veterans of the Commonwealth. Although Dr. Adleman was unable to be here today, we thank him, and his staff for their support and their contributions is greatly appreciated.

I will briefly discuss what we have done for Veterans in this past year, and then General Weller will discuss the current status of our programs and what we plan to do for the Veterans community in this coming year. We will then be available for your questions.

The Commonwealth continues to have the fourth largest veteran population in the nation with an estimated 894,861 Veterans. We advocate for our Veterans, and we oversee and support the nearly 20,000 members of the Pennsylvania National Guard. These two populations share a

comradeship that every person has served shares. I believe that we are stronger when we work together. This population in total comprises approximately 3.5 million Pennsylvanians who served, are serving or have an immediate family member that have served. We take the responsibility of training, equipping and deploying the next generation of service members as seriously as we do for caring for those who have served. Ultimately, we are humbled to work with and serve these heroes.

### **Caring for our most vulnerable Veterans**

Over half of our veteran population is at retirement age of 65 which means that more Veterans are going to need care as they continue to age. Our six State Veteran Homes provide excellent personal care, skilled nursing and dementia care for all veterans regardless of their ability to pay. Veterans with a disability rating over 75% qualify for federal long-term care or contracted support. Our homes also permit spouses of Veterans and Pennsylvania National Guard Veterans to be admitted into our homes, but there is a 12% threshold which we maintain. Due to the aging of our Veteran population and to meet the needs of the most vulnerable we have made efforts to reduce our personal care beds to make room for additional skilled and dementia care. Our resident care is paramount, but we continue to seek out efficiencies in ways to cut costs in the homes. We have found cost saving over the past several years by outsourcing some ancillary medical services, some maintenance programs and we are currently researching what other services could lead to further cost savings. We have piloted the privatization of programs such as within Pharmaceuticals to realize that they don't always provide the best services at the best cost. Care for our residents comes first, so we are very cautious and make incremental changes and

study the effects before implementation. Our six homes are all different and what may work in one location may not in another home.

### **Supporting and Honoring Pennsylvania's Veterans**

The Governor's Advisory Council on Veterans Services was established as Pennsylvania's first interagency cooperative approach to Veterans services. With Governor Wolf's support the Department has enhanced its membership to include Veterans from the State Veterans Commission and established five subcommittees to address specific areas of concern; Education, Employment and Workforce Development, Judiciary, Health and Behavioral Services, Aging Veteran Services and Woman Veterans. The council evaluates and assesses state Veterans programs in collaboration with senior staff from state agencies and commissions. We remain committed to collaborating across state government to break down silos and enhance our ability to serve our Veteran and military community.

The Veteran Service Officer Grant Program (Act 66 of 2007) awarded \$2.3 million to our Veteran Service Organization partners to improve our ability to provide education, awareness, and access establishing our most successful programs to assist Veterans in initiating a claim to receive federal benefits. Last year 18,371 claims were filed accounting for 123,739,236 million dollars in direct benefit payments to Veterans in Pennsylvania. We estimate that we have only reached 25-30% of the Veterans who are eligible for the federal Veteran's benefits. One of our top priorities is supporting this program to ensure our Pennsylvania Veterans and their families are receiving the benefits they earned.

Through Governor Wolf's leadership, the Department of Military and Veterans' Affairs continues to collaborate with various agencies across the Commonwealth as a part of our efforts to reduce Veteran's homelessness based on the Governor's challenge to find housing for homeless Veterans. This initiative brings governors, mayors, and other state and local leaders together to support federal, state, local and nonprofit efforts to end Veteran homelessness in their communities.

Over the past year, DMVA coordinated the efforts of multiple stakeholders to place more than 2,500 homeless Veterans in permanent housing in 2016. Additionally, during 2016 Philadelphia and Reading (Berks County) formally announced that they have the systems in place to successfully meet the needs of homeless Veterans in their areas.

DMVA provided more than \$5 million in direct payments to our Veterans through the various State Veterans Benefits Programs to include; Educational Gratuity, Disabled Veterans Real Estate Tax Exemption, Pension programs for the Blind and Amputee and Paralyzed Veterans and Persian Gulf Conflict Bonus.

The Veterans Trust Fund continues to do exceptionally well. The Veterans' Trust Fund granted \$550,000 to 13 Pennsylvania County Departments of Veterans Affairs Offices and 18 charitable organizations and Veterans' service organizations to assist and support Pennsylvania's Veterans and their families. Grants provided to Statewide Charitable Organizations and County Directors have benefited over 22,200 veterans or family members since 2013 who have received support

and assistance through the programs they provide. It is important to note that these funds are not appropriated but are provided through generous donations by Pennsylvanians.

In 2016, DMVA expanded its offering for individuals and businesses to make online donations benefitting Veterans which included the Pennsylvania Veterans' Memorial Trust Fund and the six Veterans Homes Resident Welfare Funds. The Department received 104 online donations to the nine funds totaling more than \$5,000. I'm pleased that we can offer the citizens of the Commonwealth a medium to easily make donations in honor of someone they know that has served or simply because they appreciate the sacrifices that Veterans have made in service to our Nation.

DMVA honored and thanked its Vietnam Veterans at 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War Commemoration events. DMVA also partnered with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund "Wall of Faces" program to locate more than 250 photos of Pennsylvania service members who sacrificed their life in the Vietnam War.

I also want to take a moment to recognize a patriot from Steelton that served in World War II. Captain Arthur Halfpapp was a member of the Army Air Corps and was missing in action until his remains were identified in late 2014. He was killed in combat in April of 1945. Captain Halfpapp led a group of aircraft on a dive-bombing run along the road parallel with the Po river near Guarda, Italy. His plane was hit by anti-aircraft fire causing the crash. I along with several of you had the honor of attending his services in April of 2016 when he was finally laid to rest. I

am delighted to report that Captain Hapfpapp was confirmed as a 2017 inductee into the Joseph A. Dugan, Jr., Hall of Valor at the Soldiers & Sailors Memorial Hall and Museum.

### **Connecting with Pennsylvania's Veterans**

More than 6,000 individuals registered online with DMVA's Veterans Registry for assistance with obtaining Veterans' benefits and services and regular updates from DMVA. The Veterans Registry is part of DMVA's long-term strategy to achieve a higher level of communication with Pennsylvania Veterans as well as our partners who support them.

DMVA's two Mobile Veterans Outreach Vans along with teams of accredited Veteran service officers traveled to 157 events across the state and interacted with nearly 3,000 Veterans. This year with the support of Agricultural Secretary Redding, we were able to get a Mobile Van into the Farm Show and participated in Veterans Day at the farm show which provided many opportunities to connect with veterans from all over Pennsylvania.

### **Advocating for Pennsylvania's Veterans and our military**

Governor Wolf, along with the Pennsylvania General Assembly, supported the military and Veterans community through the passage and enactment of seven bills into law. These included pay increases for state active duty, exemption of all Active Duty military pay from local earned income tax, the addition of the Korean War Veterans Association to the State Veterans Commission, enhancement of the Veterans' Trust Fund and the Veterans' Emergency Assistance program, and improvements to Soldiers' Grove and the Medal of Honor Grove on the Capitol

grounds. Additionally, the Pennsylvania Wing of the Civil Air Patrol, U.S. Air Force Auxiliary, was extended the death benefit under the Emergency and Law Enforcement Personnel Death Benefit program. This last legislative session provided several changes in the law that have allowed us to enhance our ability to serve the Veterans and military community and we appreciate your efforts in making these changes.

### **Conclusion**

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. We are humbled by the opportunity to work with our Veterans, military service members, and their families. I am available for any questions you may have after General Weller discusses what we are doing for our Veterans going forward.

**Major General (USAF Retired) Eric Weller**

**Deputy Adjutant General for Veterans Affairs**

Good afternoon and I thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I've been on the job since November, and in the past few months, I have learned a great deal about the Veterans community within the Commonwealth. One thing that I have found so far is the passion that the Veterans Service Organizations across the state bring to the table their concerns. They share in our advocacy efforts with their membership located in posts and auxiliaries across the commonwealth. I am proud to be working alongside these patriots as we advocate for all Veterans.

I will briefly touch on some of programs and activities that the Office of Veterans Affairs is involved with and what we will be working on over the next year. As you know, the Commonwealth has the fourth largest Veterans' population; I have included two maps with the copies of my written testimony. One provides you a breakdown of Veterans by County and the other offers an analysis of Veterans that are 65 years or older to highlight this population we have also included the percentage of this total population for each county. From these maps, you can check your districts to see your Veteran population and those who are near or in retirement.

### **Caring for our Veterans**

The federal government creates Veterans, and we must hold the Veterans Administration to account when it comes to our most vulnerable Veterans. Further, as advocates for all veterans and their family members, we pause to remember that they have earned the title of Veteran

through their service to others. All Veterans gain leadership attributes to include; dependability, integrity, decision-making, looking out for others, initiative, tenacity, professional presence, and adaptability. While the majority of Veterans are solid and resilient, unfortunately, what is often on public display or depicted on television and movies are the few who are fragile and broken. As a Veteran and military community we must take care of those who need it but as we look at those of us gathered today it is clear that a more accurate reflection of veterans is that they continue to thrive and serve others.

As my predecessor, General Beck noted during his testimony before you last year, the programs and services we provide to our Veterans are funded by less than 1% of the current annual state budget. Our staffing standards are designed to meet commonwealth and federal regulations, plus the acuity of care needs. Residents residing in our homes do contribute to their cost of care. Resident costs are based on their ability to pay and their current income. The receipt of Medicare, Medicaid and third-party revenue supplements the cost of operating the homes. The DMVA ensures that all residents are receiving all the federal benefits available to reduce state costs. Our goal is to provide high caliber, long-term skilled nursing, dementia, personal and domiciliary care while operating at the most efficient level to provide quality care and efficient services to all residents. To do this, we will maintain full-occupancy by aligning our staff and bed capacity in each home to remain agile to adapt to variables. I am pleased to report that all of our homes are operating under full licensure.

Over the past several years, we have been modernizing the homes to the community living center (CLC) models and we continue to transition beds from domiciliary to the more needed skilled and dementia care as part of facility and care improvements. A study in 2007 reported an unmet need for three additional State Veteran Homes, last year another study was conducted to determine if there were ways to reduce costs through privatization. Therefore we have been exploring options to increase capacity to support more Veterans. Two of the more promising is to offer adult day health care or expanding the number of beds through partnerships with County Residential Homes. The USDVA supports state operated Adult Day Health Care Programs through reimbursements. This model would extend care of Veterans in their homes while providing care through existing services in the State Veteran Home. This action would reduce the wait list as we could transition participants to residents when their needs change. The constraint is that to establish a program, capital improvement for dedicated space at the facility along with increasing staff will be needed. Partnering with County Residential Homes will expand capacity without additional infrastructure; expand the geographical coverage area and only a few additional staff. The constraint is funding to ensure that the veteran facility meets and passes both the commonwealth and federal standards before gaining the approval of the USDVA. The USDVA would then have to approve and inspect the Veteran facility for compliance. We will develop plans and determine the feasibility of these concepts and continue to identify other concepts that may be promising.

In assuming this position the supervision of our homes, the evaluation of policies, procedures and reviewing the staff training program is my priority. I have implemented several changes including personnel, adding checklists, reviews and audit teams to continue to monitor activities in the homes. I am committed to ensuring that the quality of care for our residents remains outstanding and will continually improve the administrative process. While exercising good fiscal stewardship, we will continue to admit new residents to our six Veterans Homes, while always mindful that we will never accept more residents than we can care for safely.

We have made great strides to increase communications at our homes. All six State Veterans' Homes have established monthly newsletters for residents, families, and staff. The newsletters provide information on upcoming events, recent activities and other interesting facts and articles for sharing. Newsletters are available on the DMVA website (DMVA.pa.gov).

### **Enhance Services to Veterans**

We have taken significant steps to increase awareness of our Veterans throughout the Commonwealth. Our Veterans are a strong presence in nearly every community of the Commonwealth, and we believe that our advocacy must include a strong voice that both highlights the value and the challenges that our Veterans bring into the community. It is inherent upon us to share the message of selfless service, sacrifice, and patriotism that form the foundation of military service. We cannot allow our Veterans to accept mediocrity from the Commonwealth and we cannot allow our communities just to forget that 1 in 12 community members is a Veteran.

We believe that we must continue to educate our Veterans, their families and those that serve them on the eligibility requirements for various federal, state and local benefits. We must educate our community leaders, and fellow citizens about both the military culture and the value our Veterans bring back into the community. Lastly, we must continue to maintain high levels of competency and accreditation for our Veteran Service Officers and Veteran Advocates who are charged with assisting our Veterans and their families.

We will continue to take action to increase access for our Veterans by linking them with competent, professional and well trained Veteran Service Officers and Veteran Advocates. With their support, we will help our Veterans and their family members to obtain the full measure of Veterans benefits to which they are entitled. We also understand the need to provide our trained Veteran Service Officers with access to state of the art automation that meets federal Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs compatibility requirements. This access includes our ability to refer our Veterans to other state agencies, community partners, and non-profit organizations when we find gaps in service that are not covered by our Veterans benefits, services or programs.

### **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. Act 109 of 2016 enhanced our ability to help our Veterans in temporary need by authorizing the use of Trust Fund money to be used under the Temporary Assistance Program for Veterans in need of shelter or other necessities of living amongst other

improvements. We greatly appreciate Governor Wolf and the General Assembly for enacting Act 109.

### **Veterans 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. It is important to note that 35 percent of the population is 70 years or older while 40 percent are between the ages of 50 and 69 and the remaining 25 percent are between the ages of 18 and 49. 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 healthcare 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. We depend on our Outreach and Reintegration Division to identify and assist these Veterans in gaining access to the benefits, programs, and services they have earned. It is imperative that we continue to invest in outreach through a holistic approach.

One of the primary 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 approximately \$93 to 1 over the life of the program. This program has demonstrated long-term success, but funding constraints limit its full potential. Additionally, it is hard to retain trained and experienced Veteran Service Officers. This program is vital and additional investment will significantly impact the number of Veterans we serve and also result in increased annual revenue from new benefits awards. I ask your support to enhance funding so necessary to achieve our outreach goals.

### **Veteran's Homelessness**

General Carrelli noted as a part of our efforts to reduce Veteran's homelessness as directed by Governor Wolf we continue to collaborate 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 marshaled Federal, State, local and nonprofit efforts to end homelessness among Veteran in their communities. Ending homelessness means reaching the point where no Veterans are sleeping on streets, and being well positioned to meet the needs of homeless Veterans and those in danger of becoming homeless in the future.

Additionally, 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.

### **Veteran Wellness**

We are proud to work with other state agencies through the Governor's Advisory Council on Veterans Services to deliver additional benefits, services, and programs to our Veterans and their families. For example, this year we will expand upon our Service Member, Veteran, and their Families Wellness Initiative. We are working with the Department of Health, Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (DHS-OMHSAS) to provide Mental Health First Aid classes that benefit our target audience but also focus on the communities where they live. We encourage our community members to attend these classes along with our Service Members, Veterans, and their families. These courses are well received throughout the Commonwealth, and we will continue to advocate for additional funding and resources that allow us to meet the demand that continues to grow.

We are currently working with the Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs (DDAP), the Department of General Services (DGS) and the Department of Human Services, Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (DHS-OMHSAS) to implement a program of Veteran Treatment Services to some of our most needy Veterans and their families. This initiative will allow us to focus on gaps in services that include outpatient drug and alcohol treatment, counseling services, housing assistance programs, peer support services, mentoring,

workforce development, family reunification, and various mental health initiatives that are designed to help our Veterans stay healthy.

### **Incarcerated Veterans**

Our staff continues to participate in numerous Veteran Court Graduation programs across the Commonwealth, and our Outreach Teams can enter the prisons where they provide assistance to the State Prison Veteran Service Units (VSU's). Our presence and support is indicative of our commitment to this minority Veteran population. We value our partnership with the Department of Corrections as we continue to meet the needs of our incarcerated Veterans, with the goal of helping these individuals reenter society.

### **Conclusion**

It is imperative that we invest in our Veteran programs. We must care for the vulnerable, identify and outreach all veterans through the registry. We are committed to providing education, awareness, and access to Veterans benefits, programs and services throughout the Commonwealth.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to serve the Commonwealth's Veterans. I am honored to advocate for all of those who have served our Commonwealth and Nation. We are prepared to answer your questions.



