

***Testimony of the Joint State Government Commission  
at the Joint Information Meeting of  
the House and Senate Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee  
February 8, 2017***

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***The Joint State Government Commission Report in Response to  
2015 Senate Resolution No. 255  
Veterans' Services and Programs in Pennsylvania***

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and other members of the committees, for asking us to present our report on veterans' services this afternoon. I'm Glenn Pasewicz, executive director of the Joint State Government Commission. I am accompanied today by Dr. Helen Khanzhina, who was the project manager for this report.

The Commission had been directed by Senate Resolution 255 of 2015 to conduct a staff study of the local, state, and federal services available to veterans in Pennsylvania. Helen will present the details of the report momentarily.

Before that, however, I would like to mention that Helen, along with Larry Feinberg, met with a number of representatives of veterans' services organizations, in person, over the phone, and through emails, and we would like to thank them for their input. We also extend our thanks to Ms. Brinda Penyak, Deputy Director of the County Commissioners Association of PA, and county directors of veterans' affairs; Ms. Christine Hawk from the PDE Division of Veterans/Military Education, and Mr. Karl Streckhald from the Bureau of Curriculum, Assessment and Instruction of the PDE Division of Planning; Ms. Mary Young and Mr. Ron Uroda from the Association of Independent Colleges and Universities of Pennsylvania (AICUP); and staff of the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs. We thank them for their cooperation and willingness to help us pull together the information in the report, and for their expert guidance on how it can better serve Pennsylvania's veteran population.

Senate Resolution 255 directed the Joint State Government Commission to review services, benefits, and programs currently offered to veterans, National Guard and Reserve service members and their families by Commonwealth agencies, veterans' service organizations, institutions of higher education, secondary schools, and the Federal Government, and to provide a report outlining the above-mentioned programs and benefits.

To get a better understanding of the status quo and perceived needs, the Joint State Government Commission conducted meetings with the county directors of veterans' affairs and with the representatives of veterans' service organizations in the Commonwealth. In addition to

these meetings, the Joint State Government Commission staff conducted individual consultations with representatives of the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, of the Department of Education, and of nonprofit organizations offering supplementary assistance to the Commonwealth veterans.

In accordance with the Resolution, the report contains a listing of federal, state, and county services, benefits, and programs currently offered to veterans, active service members, and their families in the Commonwealth.

A separate section is devoted to education. This section describes programs and services provided by Pennsylvania institutions of higher education to support active National Guard and Reserve service members, veterans, and their families. The Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children is also covered.

The report includes a review of veterans' service organizations and other nonprofit organizations that provide assistance to veterans and their families.

A brief review of benefits and services offered in other states as well as structural models of service delivery utilized by several states is also included.

Contact information for various services, benefits, and programs is presented throughout the report and in the appendices.

According to the US Department of Veterans Affairs, for the fiscal year 2016, the total number of veterans in Pennsylvania was 894,681, with 644,634 of those being wartime veterans.

The Pennsylvania Department of Veterans Affairs is responsible for providing resources and assistance to veterans and their families, and for providing quality care for aging and disabled veterans in the Commonwealth. Other departments also have subdivisions that handle veterans' benefits. Integration of efforts between all these agencies would improve provision of services to eligible veterans. The launch of the Pennsylvania Network of Care, recently announced by Governor Tom Wolf, the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs and the Department of Human Services, is expected to streamline services and expedite access for individuals and families seeking these services.

As regards veterans' employment status, in 2014 and 2015, Pennsylvania numbers were close to national averages. It is worth noting that labor participation rate was higher and unemployment rate was lower among veterans than in the non-veteran population in Pennsylvania. Assistance with job training and job placement, however, remains an important and ongoing task. Several bills introduced during the 2015-2016 Regular Session seek to promote employment and entrepreneurship opportunities for veterans.

Pennsylvania has made significant progress in combatting veterans' homelessness. The latest Point-in-Time (PIT) estimate of homelessness revealed that on a single night in January 2016, in Pennsylvania, 1,136 veterans were experiencing homelessness. In 2015, the corresponding number was 1,375. Since 2007, Pennsylvania has been able to shrink its number of

homeless veterans by over a quarter. Between 2013 and 2015, the decrease has been driven by a substantial reduction in unsheltered veterans. In the 2016 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress (AHAR), Western Pennsylvania Continuum of Care (COC) found its honorable place among COCs with the lowest rates of unsheltered homeless veterans in the nation (0.8 percent).

In September 2015, Governor Tom Wolf announced Pennsylvania's participation in a 100-day challenge to serve 550 homeless veterans from the end of September 2015 until the end of January 2016. Pennsylvania exceeded its goal and permanently housed over 900 homeless veterans during that period. In late 2016, a year after making the initial commitment, Governor Wolf and the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs announced that more than 2,200 homeless veterans had been placed in permanent housing.

Numerous Pennsylvania cities have taken up Mayors' Challenge to end veteran homelessness in their communities. Participating cities include Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Lancaster, Reading, Erie, Allentown, York, West Chester, and Downingtown. A growing number of Pennsylvania cities and counties have already declared an end to veteran homelessness. So far, Berks County, City of Reading, Lancaster City, Lancaster County, Montgomery County, and Philadelphia have all reached functional zero, while Pittsburgh has made significant progress. While there still be veterans in the these area that will experience housing crises in the future, reaching functional zero means there is the capacity and infrastructure in place to house more people than are currently in the system. It is hoped that the successful process used by these communities to end veteran homelessness can be replicated in others.

Education and training play an important part in veterans' employment prospects. Most of education benefits for veterans are provided in the GI Bill of Rights. The State Approving Agency was established in each state to manage veterans' education benefits together with the federal government. In Pennsylvania, the State Approving Agency (SAA) is the Department of Education (PDE), specifically its Division of Veterans/Military Education. As the State Approving Agency, the PDE's role is to approve and supervise education programs, training programs, and licensure/certification examinations so that eligible veterans, reservists, and their dependents may use their G.I. Bill benefits. The SAA must specifically approve each education or training program where a veteran or another eligible person wishes to use GI Bill benefits. This ensures compliance with both state and federal requirements.

An important area of the SSA's activities is outreach. In order to use their benefits, veterans and their family members need to be aware of them and know how they can be accessed. Outreach plays a critical role in ensuring veterans use the benefits they are entitled to. With education benefits in particular, pro-active outreach may motivate some veterans decide to continue their education while otherwise, they might not make this decision.

The PDE Division of Veterans/Military Education develops and distributes numerous brochures to inform veterans and other eligible individuals of their GI benefits.

The department manages the Governor's Welcome Home program, mailing an information packet to each veteran returning to the Commonwealth. Once per quarter, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs forwards the information about all recently discharged

individuals who listed Pennsylvania as their home of record. Based on this information, the SSA mails a packet to each of these individuals. The packet contains a GI Bill brochure and other relevant information. Over 200,000 packets have been mailed to returning individuals since 1990. In 2015, over 5,000 packets were sent to returning individuals. The GI Bill brochure details what institutions and organizations the GI benefits can be used at and outlines specific steps an applicant needs to take to activate his benefits.

In its current form, the Post-9/11 GI Bill has vastly enhanced education and training benefits available to veterans. The Post-9/11 GI Bill can cover all in-state tuition and fees at public degree-granting schools, but may not cover all private degree-granting schools and out-of-state tuition. The Yellow Ribbon program provides additional support in these situations. Degree-granting institutions of higher learning that elect to participate in the Post-9/11 GI Bill Yellow Ribbon program agree to make additional funds available for a veteran's education program without an additional charge to the veteran's GI Bill entitlement. These institutions of higher learning voluntarily enter into a Yellow Ribbon agreement with VA and choose the amount of tuition and fees that will be contributed; VA matches that amount and issues payments directly to the institution.

Most of the private colleges and universities in Pennsylvania participate in the Yellow Ribbon program. The list of Pennsylvania institutions of higher learning, along with the information on specific programs and the maximum school contribution per students in the academic year can be accessed online and can also be found in our report.

### ***Recommendations***

Most of the benefits and programs for veterans, active, National Guard and Reserve service members are determined and funded by the federal government. Consequently, room for improvement lies mostly in the areas of effective program administration and facilitating access to services. In the staff conversations with veterans' service organizations' representatives and county directors of veterans' affairs, two issues emerged as the main focus: outreach to veterans and collaboration between agencies. The staff research confirmed the importance of these issues. Accordingly, most of the recommendations in this report deal with these focal areas.

- Conduct coordinated outreach and engagement efforts to proactively seek out veterans in need of assistance, sharing information across outreach teams and sites and collaborating across systems.
  - Establish representatives of veterans' service organizations presence in more local legislative offices;
  - Increase the number of service officers in underserved areas (for example, in rural, thinly populated northern counties);
  - Focus on the transitional periods in veterans' life such as readjustment to civilian life after the period of service, and retirement, which involves changes in insurance coverage, et cetera.

- Continue support for Act 66 Outreach programs; increase funding, if possible; and maintain a separate line item in the DMVA budget for this program.
- Increase coordination and collaboration between state departments, veterans' service organizations, and various agencies involved in veterans' life.
- Facilitate coordinated assessment and entry systems to improve the ability of veterans to get the help they need.
- Enhance educational campaign throughout various channels to deliver information about existing programs and services to veterans as well as their families, who are often less familiar with this information than veterans themselves.
- Add clarification regarding the Veterans' Trust Fund grants.