

THE AMERICAN LEGION, DEPARTMENT OF PENNSYLVANIA

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PENNSYLVANIA AMERICAN LEGION VSO GRANT PROGRAM TESTIMONY

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Good morning distinguished members present. My name is Kit Watson, Department Adjutant for the Pennsylvania American Legion. I requested to speak today representing The American Legion's efforts for Act 66 of 2007, the VSO Grant Program. This program has proven to be the gold standard for veteran outreach in our state and has become the most successful veteran support bill ever passed by your members. This program touches more veterans than any other veteran support program ever enacted by the state to which we have previously testified to your committees on several occasions. Today I want to tell you what this program means to us at The American Legion. Since the year 1919, taking care of veterans has been one of the four pillars of service that our organization was built upon. The VSO Grant Program has given us the ability to perform this mission at a much higher standard. The majority of veteran outreach in our state is a by-product of the VSO Grant Program. In The American Legion, we averaged over 78 outreach visits per month last year, mostly to legislative offices, and requested benefits for 5,020 veterans of which more than half of these veterans were first time original claims. Our service officers assisted another 2,282 veterans for non-VA military service related issues and appeals. Without the VSO Grant program, we would return to the old days of hoping veterans hear of their benefits and we would wait for them to come to us for assistance. We have used our legislative outreach program to be where the veterans need us, in their local communities. We have essentially begged this body for additional resources in the VSO Grant Program over the past few years. Why? Because we have proven that this program works. With an aging veteran population in Pennsylvania where more than half of our veterans are over the age of 65, we cannot afford to continue to push funding for this program down the road. Our veterans need the assistance now. Employing fully trained and accredited veteran service officers is critical to the success of reaching veterans who are unaware of the benefits they may be entitled to.

We have testified in the past that service officer salaries are our biggest obstacle and it remains our largest hurdle today. Last year we lost nine (9) fully trained and accredited service officers to higher paying positions. We have become the training ground for better paying jobs with veteran support positions. Losing nine service officers degrades our ability to provide and maintain the highest standards of assistance that we owe our veterans. We challenge you to prove your support for the Commonwealth's veterans by finding the monetary resources to improve this program. Our organizations have shown you the roadmap of how to reach veterans and their families, but we can't take those roads without retaining the quality staff we employ to drive it. We can only do that by adding additional funding to this program. VA Expenditures for Compensation & Pension last year to Pennsylvania veterans was \$2.6 BILLION dollars proving there is a strong return on investment. The majority of our outreach efforts are done in legislative offices so you have the ability to evaluate our performance on a daily basis.

I would like to end my testimony by quoting some of your fellow member's words.

"My district office staff are charged with helping constituents navigate through bureaucratic red tape. By having a service office visit monthly, they are able to go above and beyond being a referral system to Veterans Affairs." - Representative Peter Schweyer, 22nd District

"This invaluable service is something that our community relies on and I am honored to offer my office as a location for The American Legion." - Representative Stephen Barrar, 160th District

"The VSO Outreach Program is an excellent service and an important resource for veterans to be able to connect with someone who can help them receive the benefits and services they deserve." - Representative Nick Miccarelli, 162nd District

"Please accept this letter as my full support for continued funding for the VSO Outreach Program offered by The American Legion. This excellent service allows veterans of my district the opportunity to meet face to face with a skilled and friendly service officer." - Representative Rich Irvin, 81st District

"This program is a priority for veterans seeking benefits and I fully support the continued efforts provided by the VSO Outreach Program." - Representative Fred Keller, 85th District

"It is my belief that the Veteran Service Officer Outreach Program is a much needed program as evidenced by my own district office. I would appreciate your serious consideration of continued funding for this program." - Representative Lynda Culver, 108th District

"I cannot express how much this service means to me, my staff and most of all, my veteran constituents. I hope that we can continue this relationship for years to come. Through this program, The American Legion is providing a great service and we feel fortunate that we have the opportunity to utilize the program and reach out to veterans of the 116th Legislative District." - Representative Tarah Toohill, 116th District

"I am writing today to express my pleasure with our relationship with the Philadelphia branch of The American Legion" - Representative Justin Simmons, 131st District

"Veterans are a critical part of our community and their selfless sacrifice to our country is without question. The services that you and your organization provide to our local veterans is crucial in ensuring that they receive the appropriate benefits. I have seen first-hand the extraordinary work you provide by providing outreach services at my Sayre District office." - Representative Tina Pickett, 110th District

"News of this program spread throughout the district quickly and veterans were extremely appreciative of this support. Our feedback has been overwhelmingly positive with veterans telling us that they absolutely feel they receive first class advice and assistance." - Representative Adam Harris, 82nd District

"I would like to express my full support for the continuation of the VSO Grant Program and in particular the favorable consideration of The American Legion request for a grant." - Representative Cris Dush, 66th District

"The time VSO officers spend in legislative district offices such as mine have proven to be invaluable to many constituents searching for assistance." - Representative Ryan Mackenzie, 134th District

“I believe this funding will be very beneficial to the veterans of my district; therefore I give my strong support and encourage the approval of VSO Outreach Grant Program applications.” - Representative Martin Causer, 67th District

“Both my staff and I are very pleased with the services offered by your staff and look forward to a long and continuing relationship that has proven to be very beneficial to the residents of my legislative district.” - Representative Garth Everett, 84th District

“My office utilizes these services every month. The veterans of the 46th Legislative District turn to my office for assistance with veteran related questions and concerns, particularly benefit related inquires. It is a great resource.” - Representative Jason Ortitay, 46th District

“Our partnership is a critical part of the high-quality array of services I endeavor to consistently provide my constituents.” - Senator Michele Brooks, 50th District

“I proudly support you in your efforts to obtain funding so that this great program can continue to operate in my office to serve veterans of my district and across the Commonwealth.” - Representative Pam Snyder, 50th District

“I have received nothing but positive feedback from veterans and their families for the invaluable assistance that your American Legion service officer provides for them.” - Representative Brett Miller, 41st District

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today and please find a way to fund another million dollar increase in this program. It is way overdue.