

June 12, 2007

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Joint Hearing of the Commonwealth's House and Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committees to Consider the PA War Veterans Council Request for State Funding to Support Veterans Service Offices operated by The American Legion of Pennsylvania, the Department of Pennsylvania Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Disabled American Veterans of Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania AMVETS.

**PA American Legion Testimony
Given By Department Adjutant Kit Watson**

Chairmans Baker, Dinniman, Melio, and Fairchild and all committee members present I am elated at the opportunity to address this joint session of the Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee. I am Kit Watson and I am the Department Adjutant for the Pennsylvania American Legion. We are a war time veterans' organization with 240,000 members statewide which is the largest membership in our country for a Veterans Service Organization. We have 830 American Legion Posts.

Our organization was formed on four pillars strong National defense, taking care of veterans, mentoring youth, promoting patriotism & honor. I along with my counterparts here today want to speak on one of these, taking care of veterans. Since 1919 we have maintained Department Service Officers to assist veterans with obtaining earned benefits from our Federal Government. We accomplish this with no outside funding from anyone.

Our proposal has been given to each of you. It contains all relevant information and contains accurate data with references to provide support for our proposal. I want to highlight just a few.

- Veterans who go through a Veterans Service Organization service officer for assistance filing their claims receive a significant increase in the amount of their average awards of \$11,122 as opposed to those without VSO representation who receive an average of \$4,413.
- As of March 30, 2007, \$59,763,803.78 dollars were brought in to 54,290 PA residents for a one-month period through the efforts and support of these four Veterans Service Organization's. These awards also reduce the amount of state expended funds on Medicaid.
- The cost to PA's AL membership to support this effort is becoming increasingly difficult. Dues have not kept pace with inflation thus making budgeting tight on salaries, IT equipment, and insurance, which as all of you know has increased by volumes.
- Inadequate salaries make replacing our retiring service officers very difficult and don't attract the best applicants. With a \$21,500 starting salary we have not attracted any applicants in Philadelphia or Erie, and we currently have openings at both locations. (note the Booting Department in Philadelphia currently starts out their booters at \$33,000.00 annually, these guys place boots on cars with unpaid parking tickets.) How can we compete with that?

- Veterans seeking our assistance are not required to be a member to be represented, (in fact most are not) we do not require them to join and we do not charge them anything for our services!
- The amount of military men and women needing future VA assistance is markedly increased over previous wars and conflicts. Who is going to be there for them?
- Our proposal includes an increased outreach effort to reach even more Pennsylvania Veterans. 1.14 Million is in our proposal to you and it is broken down as to how we intend to utilize this amount.
- It should be noted that not one penny of the proposed funding is going to benefit our respective organizations. It will benefit our veterans population and our Commonwealth!
- IT compliance: as we are all aware the useful lifespan of a computer today is three years. We will update and maintain our Service Officers and staff computers and related software.
- Training, as you can see from the awards "we have trained capable service officers and staffs". We will maintain their level of expertise as well as bringing new hires up to speed ASAP!
- Our proposal will maintain and expand our system adding to what's already proven to be good for our veterans' population.
- We don't take State funding lightly. We realize we have an obligation to expend monies as efficiently as possible. We would like to point out that our funding request is not a one-way funding. This funding will pay dividends to and for our Commonwealth!
- As an example: Michigan is the closest to our demographics with 850,000 veterans there as opposed to our 1.1 million. Last year Michigan Veteran Service Organization's received 3.9 million of state funding. The return to Michigan veterans was \$248,404,063 which equates to \$63 for every dollar expended by the State of Michigan. Would we expect less by the efforts of our Veteran Service Organization's? Absolutely not!
- I want to express my appreciation for your willingness to hear our testimony and on behalf of our American Legion and its 240,000 members across our Commonwealth I thank you for your consideration of our proposal. We hope you will support this effort this year.