

June 12, 2007

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Joint Hearing of Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committees to Consider 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.

Disabled America Veterans Presentation Given By Service Officer Carmen DeSanti

Good morning, Committee members. Thank you for this hearing as we try to improve how veterans in Pennsylvania are guided to their VA benefits.

The mission of the Disabled American Veterans is "building better lives for America's disabled veterans and their families." We believe that providing the most effective Veterans Service Office is paramount to this mission.

The Pennsylvania DAV Service Officer program has:

- six full-time service officers in Philadelphia
- four officers in Pittsburgh
- and a part-time officer in Wilkes-Barre who serves four days a month.
- All are accredited and certified through the advanced VA level.

The DAV offices have some secretarial support:

- two secretaries serve four officers in Pittsburgh
- three secretaries support six officers in Philadelphia
- one full-time secretary serves in the Wilkes Barre office.

Like all of the veterans group service offices represented here today, the DAVs service officers serve all veterans—not just members of the DAV.

DAV service officers lead veterans in Pennsylvania to more than \$75 million dollars a year in benefits, compensation and pensions. For 10 months starting last May, our service officers handled more than 19,000 veteran contacts.

There's much more service we can provide in rural areas through better outreach. Veterans living in rural areas deserve the same access to our service officers as veterans in or near cities. Some disabled veterans have trouble traveling to cities. Others cannot travel to our offices during the work day. Some simply do not know that our service offices exist.

The DAV would spend most of the money it is asking for from the state to improve the outreach of its veterans service officers.

The DAV—with support from its National parent organization—currently dedicates approximately \$1.2 million dollars to run its service offices in Pennsylvania. We are not sure if our current funding will continue.

Even if it does, to expand the number of veterans we can serve, we need financial help from the state.

The DAV is asking for \$300,000 from the state for these purposes:

- To hire one additional full-time officer each in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Wilkes-Barre.
- To pay expenses for expanded outreach that will take them outside of major cities and closer to where many veterans live
- To purchase computers and other technology that will allow service officers to serve veterans remotely
- To help cover the costs of adding the new officers to our system

Like the VFW, the American Legion and the AMVETS—the DAV trains our service officers to the highest possible level. When a veteran comes into our offices, they know we will guide them through the entire VA claims process. We are not just paper pushers. We are veterans advocates in our hearts and claims prosecutors by training.

We have the expertise to review how laws and regulations apply to veterans medical conditions. We identify evidence that helps claims stand up. We can inform veterans when they have been under compensation. We advise veterans about their appeals rights and represent them through the VA's bureau of veterans appeals.

We are sure that you agree that veterans deserve everything they are entitled to. You can measure the difference our service officers make in the many millions of dollars. Veterans who use service officers outside of our veterans groups receive less in compensation and benefits on average.

We really are talking about quality of life issues. The longer it takes to get a veteran into the VA system, the more complicated their health condition can become. Those who don't receive needed assistance may not live life to the fullest. They may be experiencing unnecessary pain. Their Post Traumatic Stress Disorder may be getting worse. They may be heading toward homelessness. We all owe it to those who defended the cause of freedom to get them their benefits as fast as possible.

Before I close, I want to speak about how much time the DAV volunteers to serving veterans. Our organization donates thousands of volunteer hours to serving veterans. We have 20 chapter service officers and around 300 volunteer drivers who take disabled veterans to medical appointments. We also have hospital coordinators at all VA medical centers.

Our heroes who put their lives on the line for us deserve better. They deserve the best. It would be great if every veteran received the benefits and services they are entitled to receive. Our goal is to make that happen as fast as possible. We are also trying to make sure the State receives all of the federal funding that is due for its veterans.

We look forward to working with you to make these important goals a reality. Thank you.