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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 Department of Veterans of Foreign Wars Testimony Given By VFW 2006-07 State Commander Dominic A. DeFranco**

Good morning Chairman Baker, Chairman Melio, Chairman Fairchild and Chairman Dinniman, and other committee members. We appreciate having the chance to outline the War Council's top legislative issue with this important committee. We hope you agree that veterans and their families deserve the absolute best service from the Commonwealth. The funding we are asking for will have a significant impact on how well our State connects veterans and their loved ones with benefits.

The VFW's mission of "to Honor the Deceased by Serving the Living" is centered first and foremost on serving and supporting veterans and their families.

The Department of Pennsylvania VFW's Service Office Program has a full-time service officer in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Wilkes-Barre. We also have one additional full-time claims consultant in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. All staff are certified through the VA and they serve all veterans—not just VFW members. Our Philadelphia and Pittsburgh office have one secretary each.

Our Service Offices lead veterans to more than 40 million dollars a year in benefits and compensation. Based on the first quarter of 2007, VFW Service Offices handled nearly ten thousand veteran contacts, creating more than one thousand VA claims. These claims resulted in over 11 million dollars of benefits and compensation coming into Pennsylvania—again from just January to the end of March. These numbers are impressive, but they could be higher. With the limited staff that we can afford to hire, we cannot keep up with demand.

The Pennsylvania VFW dedicates a large part of its annual budget to run its Service Office Program—close to 300,000 dollars annually. This represents a sizeable percent of our yearly budget. Our ability to keep doing this is in serious jeopardy as our membership revenue declines.

It's important to note that we are not trying to stop serving veterans through our Service Offices. However, we estimate that to keep our program running and to increase its capabilities, we need \$500,000 in State funding.

Specifically, \$306,000 of this funding would be for salaries to expand our capabilities by hiring:

- a full-time Service Officer to expand outreach throughout the state.
- an additional full-time Service Officer in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and Wilkes-Barre.
- and a full-time secretary in the Wilkes-Barre Office.

A portion of that \$306,000 would go to raising salaries of existing staff in these offices. This would address a pattern of losing service officers due to the low salaries and limited benefits we can afford to offer. With State funding, we would increase our starting pay for full-time Service Officers from \$27,000 to \$32,000. We would raise starting salaries for full-time secretaries from \$16,500 to \$21,500.

The balance of the \$500,000 we are requesting would be used to:

- bring insurance benefits for Service Officers and secretaries more in line with today's marketplace.

- cover travel by our Veterans Service Program Chairman and committee members, whose oversight is critical to program success
- reimburse Service Officers for travel during outreach and other activities
- payroll taxes, postage, office equipment, supplies and parking
- purchase a laptop computer for outreach when veterans are served at remote locations

Allocating this funding for these purposes is a wise investment. Our Service Officers handle claims from the initial filing to serving as power of attorney and handling appeals. Their advanced training and experience maximize veterans' benefits by focusing on key medical issues that help move claims forward. This is critical given the complex nature of some service connected medical conditions.

- This in-depth knowledge and higher accreditation makes a difference to veterans in real dollars. Our services officers help veterans get all they are entitled to.
- With State funding, we could reach into new areas of the state where veterans and families do not know about benefits and services. Our Service Officers could travel beyond our offices in cities to more rural areas. Veterans who might not otherwise meet with a Service Officer could tap into the VA system.
- Getting veterans into the VA system quicker will save lives. Whether veterans have physical or emotional wounds, everyone benefits when the process runs faster. Many veterans return from combat service with post traumatic stress disorder, which can develop into a crisis unless support is provided.
- Many veterans already in the VA system will suffer from additional medical issues or complications to existing ones. This translates into more visits to Service Officers.
- In addition to our paid Service Office staff, you should know that the VFW contributes thousands of hours of volunteer time to support veterans service. Our state Service Office chairman is a volunteer who often puts in more than a full-time schedule for no pay. And each of Pennsylvania's 570 VFW posts are asked to recruit and train a volunteer Post Service Officer to assist veterans.
- If the VFW's highly effective Service Officers are not available in the future, thousands of veterans will have to rely on Service Officers with less training and less experience. Less VA money would come into the State. And the State would have to spend more money to expand its own system for serving veterans.

All of this annual funding would be used to give veterans the outstanding service and representation that they deserve—through a system proven to be highly effective. That is good public policy. That is a good use of taxpayer money—with a significant return on the State's investment.

I would be happy to answer any questions you have.