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Statement of Brigadier General Cecil Hengeveld
Deputy Adjutant General for Veterans' Affairs
Department of Military and Veterans Affairs
Before the
Senate Veterans' Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee
and
House Veterans' Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee

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Chairman Baker, Chairman Melio and members of the Committees, thank you for the opportunity to present information to you concerning the proposal of the Pennsylvania War Veterans Council for a Commonwealth grant program to support the veterans' service officer programs of designated statewide veterans' organizations.

I have spoken to former POWs, veterans, and their family members. They have many stories with one common thread. They served their nation. Veterans and their families have paid the price for our freedom and kept our Nation strong. The price of freedom is real - as real as separation from family, as real as the trauma of combat, as real as a disabling wound, as real as lost lives. Many of today's military members will continue to pay the price of freedom long, long after their military service has ended. They will always deserve the benefits their service earned them. We must help every Pennsylvanian receive the VA benefits they deserve.

The leaders of our state veterans' organizations briefed our Adjutant General, Major General Jessica Wright, about their proposal for state funding to support veterans' service officer

programs in late April, and they presented it to Governor Rendell in early May. This proposal is the War Veterans Council number one legislative priority.

The basic concept, as we understand it, is for the Commonwealth to establish a new grant program to make grants to the four largest nationally-chartered Pennsylvania veterans' service organizations to help them recruit, retain, pay, train and equip well-qualified and accredited veterans' service officers. The War Veterans Council proposal seeks funding at the level of \$2 per Pennsylvania veteran (or about \$2.2 million) to fund this program, with funds to be split among the four largest state veterans' organizations that employ full-time accredited veterans' service officers.

The State Veterans' Commission endorsed the concept of funding for the veterans' service office programs at their meeting in January 2007. Neither the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs nor the State Veterans' Commission has taken an official formal position on the specifics of this proposal.

It is clear that veterans whose claims for VA compensation and pension payments and other benefits are prepared by accredited veterans' service officers fare much better and receive higher awards than those who submit claims without such an accredited service officer. Any proposal to enhance services to our veterans in this area is certainly worthy of consideration.

Pennsylvania has made real progress in recent years with regard to new claims for compensation and pensions being processed and the amount of awards. For new claims filed in the last few years, Pennsylvania was the eighth highest ranking state in the nation. Having said that, we recognize that there is still room for improvement and focused efforts in this area can

help. When you look at all compensation and pension claims (filed over 60 years) on a state-by-state basis, Pennsylvania still ranks relatively low in compensation and pension claim awards per veteran.

As the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Inspector General pointed out in the 2005 report cited in the War Veterans Council plan, there are several demographic and veterans' population factors that affect these state-by-state comparisons. Military retirees (those with at least 20 years of service who retire from the armed forces) receive higher compensation and pension payments, on average, than other veterans. Pennsylvania has a lower percentage of military retirees among our veteran population than many other states with which we are compared. World War II veterans receive somewhat lower awards than more recent service veterans, and Pennsylvania has a higher proportion of older veterans than other states.

These demographic factors should not discourage us from doing more to help make sure Pennsylvania's over 1 million veterans and their families receive all the federal veterans' benefits they have earned and so richly deserve. There are a variety of sources from which veterans can obtain the services of accredited veterans' service offices to assist in the preparation and submission of claims. As General Wright announced in March, DMVA has recently undertaken an effort to bring six veterans' service officers to the staff of the Bureau for Veterans' Affairs. Nearly all of our county directors of veterans' affairs are accredited veterans' service officers, and they play an important role in helping veterans across Pennsylvania. A new federal law allowing lawyers to charge for representing veterans in appeals related to compensation and pension claims is about to go into effect. It is much too early to tell what

impacts, if any, this will have on assisting deserving veterans with their claims. I must tell you that this change is quite controversial among veterans' groups.

The work of our veterans' service organizations is an important element in assisting veterans with their claims. In Pennsylvania, the American Legion, the AMVETS, the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) currently employ accredited veterans' service officers. These and other Pennsylvania veterans' service organizations also have many volunteers who assist veterans at posts across Pennsylvania.

DMVA and its Bureau for Veterans' Affairs strongly support state programs that can help Pennsylvania veterans receive all the federal benefits that they have earned through their service to our Nation. The War Veterans Council proposal should enhance the fine efforts of these service organizations by making grants focused on recruiting, retaining, paying, training and equipping professional, accredited veterans' service officers.

The General Assembly currently funds grants to the Pennsylvania Department of the Disabled American Veterans for the VA Hospital Veterans' Transportation Network. The Governor's budget included \$350,000 to support this program. This program is well coordinated because we know exactly how much money will be granted to the DAV each year, and we prepare a grant agreement with appropriate provisions to support this important effort. In the past, a similar approach has been taken for grants to the Civil Air Patrol.

I note that the organizations have worked out a formula for allocation of the funds among themselves, and I expect that they will continue to work together effectively. It would be desirable if the allocation of funds were handled in a manner similar to the DAV hospital

transportation program. It would add complex and unnecessary steps to the process for DMVA to have to receive applications for grants and allocate the grants based on criteria to be defined by law. I would also be remiss if I failed to note that, no matter how this program is structured, it will unquestionably result in additional responsibilities for my office and our staff. We believe the program, if enacted, should include some limited funding to offset the costs of its administration.

Finally, I want to say a few words about use of statistics. Because Pennsylvania has an aging veterans' population, the VA projects that the number of veterans in Pennsylvania will decline in the future. Although we are adding new veterans into the system as a result of overseas combat operations, the VA estimates that these numbers will not equal the loss of older World War II veterans. For this reason, I think we need to be careful in tying funding for any veterans' support program directly to the estimated number of veterans in Pennsylvania at any one time. The \$2 per veteran figure used by the War Veterans Council is a good starting point, but I hope that, if this program goes forward, the number of Pennsylvania veterans will not be the sole factor determining funding in future years.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this information to the committee. I am joined today by DMVA's chief counsel, Dennis Guise, and we would be happy to answer any questions.