

1 COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA  
2 HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
3 SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY & VETERANS FACILITIES

4 IN RE: HOUSE BILL 344

5 STATE CAPITOL  
6 IRVIS OFFICE BUILDING  
7 ROOM G-50  
8 HARRISBURG, PENNSYLVANIA

9 THURSDAY, JUNE 5, 2008, 10:00 A.M.

10 BEFORE:

11 HONORABLE RICHARD T. GRUCELA, CHAIRMAN  
12 HONORABLE KAREN D. BEYER  
13 HONORABLE NEAL GOODMAN  
14 HONORABLE SCOTT E. HUTCHINSON  
15 HONORABLE RON MILLER  
16 HONORABLE JOHN J. SIPTROTH  
17 HONORABLE TIMOTHY J. SOLOBAY  
18 HONORABLE ROSITA C. YOUNGBLOOD

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## 1 P R O C E E D I N G S

2 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: The hour of 10 has arrived,  
3 so we're going to begin the Subcommittee hearing for the  
4 Veterans Committee. Again, this is a subcommittee. My  
5 Co-Chairperson, Karen Beyer, is about to join us. So  
6 before we start to have any other remarks, I would ask Mr.  
7 John Brenner from the VFW to lead us in the Pledge.

8 MR. BRENNER: Thank you, sir.

9 Facing the flag of our country, let's all join  
10 together in the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of the  
11 United States of America.

12 (All joined in Pledge of Allegiance.)

13 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Thank you very much, John.

14 And, again, we welcome everyone to this  
15 Subcommittee hearing, and in a minute, I'll ask my  
16 Co-Chair, Representative Beyer, if she'd like to make any  
17 remarks. I would just make a few as we start. Again, this  
18 is a subcommittee, so that's why the entire committee of  
19 the Veterans Affairs Committee is not here.

20 The Subcommittee is much shorter. It's about  
21 seven members, and after Representative Beyer, we'll have  
22 the other members who are here introduce themselves. We  
23 have to be out of the room by 2:00. Okay? The hearing is  
24 scheduled to go right until 2 p.m.

25 I would ask us to try to stay within each of

1 these time frames, and the individuals who will testify,  
2 who can testify, are the only ones that are on our list.  
3 And I understand the only change is at around 1:45, that  
4 Mr. Charles Jackson is splitting his time with Bruce  
5 Navarre, if I'm pronouncing that correctly. So at this  
6 particular time, I would ask Representative Beyer if she  
7 has any opening remarks.

8 REPRESENTATIVE BEYER: Thank you, Representative  
9 Grucela.

10 For those of you who may not know this, I am the  
11 only female veteran in the House or the Senate and the only  
12 one in the House's history to be elected and that served on  
13 active duty. And I say that to you in my opening remarks  
14 because I need you all to recognize how important I see  
15 this issue. Now, as a Representative of the 131st, I can  
16 tell you that my office addresses innumerable amount of  
17 veterans' issues.

18 We're consistently referring them to Congressman  
19 Charlie Dent, who happens to be my Congressman in Lehigh  
20 Valley. And it is my belief, my firm belief, that we  
21 absolutely do not do enough for our veterans. Now, that's  
22 not to say that everyone doesn't do their best. The  
23 problem is is that, in my mind, the services for our  
24 veterans, our outreach for our veterans is not consolidated  
25 enough.

1           To me, I will be interested to hear obviously  
2 the comments and forthcoming testimony, but the fact of the  
3 matter is is I'm a veteran. So you're not talking to  
4 somebody that doesn't know that. You're also talking to a  
5 woman who is married to a retired Air Force Lieutenant  
6 Colonel who served on active duty for 21-and-a-half years  
7 and graduated from the Air Force Academy.

8           My husband and I have never been able to avail  
9 ourselves of any veteran services in the state. Now, it's  
10 true that we're both working, but when I hear the cries my  
11 World War II veterans and my Korean War veterans and my  
12 Vietnam veterans and my Persian Gulf veterans and my Iraqi  
13 War veterans tell me that services are not available to  
14 them, I know that is true.

15           So I'm looking forward to this testimony. I  
16 want you to know that I am fully supportive of this  
17 legislation by Representative Siptroth, fully supportive.  
18 I almost wish that I was the sponsor of this legislation,  
19 but I believe in what he is attempting to do here.

20           And I think that if we all can put our heads  
21 together, I think everyone will see that this is the right  
22 thing to do. So thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for  
23 holding this hearing.

24           CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Thank you, Representative  
25 Beyer.

1           And at this time, I'd like to have the people  
2 that are up here at this table introduce themselves  
3 starting with my far left.

4           Pat?

5           MR. CUSACK: Pat Cusack, Executive Director for  
6 the Committee under Chairman Tony Melio today,  
7 Representative Grucela.

8           REPRESENTATIVE SOLOBAY: Tim Solobay, State  
9 Representative for the 48th Legislative District in  
10 Washington County, out in western PA.

11          REPRESENTATIVE SIPTROTH: I'm State  
12 Representative John Siptroth from the 189th District  
13 representing Pike and Monroe Counties.

14          REPRESENTATIVE HUTCHINSON: Representative Scott  
15 Hutchinson, 64th District, Venango County and portions of  
16 Butler County.

17          MR. O'LEARY: Rick O'Leary, Executive Director  
18 for Chairman Russ Fairchild.

19          REPRESENTATIVE YOUNGBLOOD: Rosita Youngblood,  
20 Representative for Philadelphia, 198th District.

21          CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Thanks, everyone.

22           At this time, I would ask Representative  
23 Siptroth, who is the sponsor of House Bill 344, for his  
24 opening remarks.

25           John?

1                   REPRESENTATIVE SIPTROTH: Thank you, Mr.  
2 Chairman.

3                   Members of the Committee and testifiers, ladies  
4 and gentlemen, I'm Representative John Siptroth, as I  
5 previously indicated. And I am the prime sponsor of House  
6 Bill 344.

7                   I'd like to thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding  
8 this hearing and for the courtesies your staff extended to  
9 me.

10                  I'm an honorably discharged Navy veteran who  
11 served for four years from 1966 to 1970. This bill would  
12 create a new department for our government. This is not a  
13 matter to be dealt with lightly. I believe it should have  
14 careful and serious deliberation weighing carefully the  
15 facts and arguments that will come before each and every  
16 one of us today to reach our conclusion.

17                  The creation of a new department necessarily  
18 puts an added burden on our taxpayers, and we should never  
19 do that except for compelling reasons. I do believe that  
20 when you have heard the witnesses and examined the studies  
21 and other exhibits, that you will reach the same conclusion  
22 that I have, that the bills should move forward and a new  
23 department be created.

24                  This bill fulfills the Governor's promise to our  
25 veterans as a candidate and as Governor that he would

1 establish a separate Department of Veterans Affairs. I am  
2 pleased that 82 of our colleagues in the House, from both  
3 parties, have signed on as co-sponsors of this bill. This  
4 bill establishes a department and a secretary that will  
5 give greater visibility to veterans and veterans' programs.

6           They will better educate veterans on programs  
7 available to them, will have better outreach, will provide  
8 broader and better counseling and claims services and  
9 increase the number of veterans annually joining the  
10 veterans' service organizations.

11           Mr. Chairman, the bill before your Committee  
12 today offers a new vision of service to the veterans of the  
13 Commonwealth. It brings with it an enlarged agenda, a  
14 grander charter of action. It is a vision for the present,  
15 but one that will endure for the future. It is the vision  
16 of a separate Department of Veterans Affairs, one that has  
17 a cabinet-level secretary as a powerful policy advocate and  
18 administrator for veterans' affairs.

19           The veterans' secretary will be solely devoted  
20 to the veterans, their interests and needs. The charter of  
21 the new department will reach far beyond that of the  
22 present Bureau of Veterans Affairs, which has been and is  
23 devoted solely to state claims and benefits under various  
24 state statutes, state veterans' homes and a school for the  
25 children of veterans.



1           The charter of the new department will reach  
2 into all areas, forums, facilities, activities and services  
3 that affect veterans in our state. The veterans' secretary  
4 will be an advocate for all veterans in all of these areas,  
5 whether they are federal, state or county. It is clear  
6 that this enlarged agenda can only be executed by a  
7 separate department and a cabinet-level secretary.

8           The present Bureau has not been helping veterans  
9 in appealing adverse claims decisions to the extent that it  
10 should. The veteran feels abandoned once his claim is  
11 denied or diminished. The new department will be well  
12 staffed to handle this appellate function. In creating the  
13 new department, the activities of the Bureau, which as I  
14 say for the most part, deals solely with the state  
15 benefits, will be retained and transferred as is to the new  
16 department.

17           Added to that will be the work of many federal  
18 benefit programs. While these are federal programs, they  
19 will rely upon the states to administer them. Other  
20 witnesses will point out that, our state is handling these  
21 programs poorly compared to other states. The studies that  
22 are before you will point out a general systemic failure  
23 and faults on all parts of the system.

24           I question the Bureau system, which has too  
25 little contact with the federal government, whereas the new

1 department will have extensive daily contact. The new  
2 department will have greater contact with other state  
3 agencies that had great state or federal programs that  
4 affect veterans. That is lacking now, and the benefits of  
5 coordination and mutual effort is lost. The issue of a  
6 separate veterans' department is not, as some supporters of  
7 Act 66 think, one that can be fixed by just adding a few  
8 service officers to handle disability claims.

9           The problems are much deeper and broader. The  
10 studies recommended, and I agree, that the whole system  
11 must be replaced with a new structure that the new  
12 department will provide. It is not the purpose of this  
13 bill, nor was it ever the intent, nor is there anything in  
14 this bill that can be construed in any way to impair the  
15 traditional efforts of the veterans' service organizations  
16 to provide service to veterans.

17           Indeed, as I view it, the separate department  
18 will be more helpful to all organizations in carrying out  
19 their present functions than the present system which  
20 pretty much leaves them on their own. There is nothing  
21 incompatible about the support for this bill and support  
22 for Act 66. I would visualize funding for Act 66 as a line  
23 item in the new department's budget.

24           The studies and the other witnesses tell us the  
25 new department will provide better services to our

1 veterans. The studies compare us with other states, and  
2 ours is not on par at all. The studies tell us that New  
3 York, for example, with a veterans population comparable to  
4 ours, gets at least 725 million more dollars each year than  
5 we do in benefit paid to their veterans. They will show  
6 that among all the states, that we are eighth from the  
7 bottom in federal veterans' benefits and services received.

8           They will show you that we receive \$5 hundred  
9 per veteran below the national average paid to veterans  
10 across the county. Think what that means. If we can raise  
11 our benefits received to just the national average, the  
12 state's veterans will receive 5 hundred million more  
13 dollars each year. These dollar amounts, gentlemen and  
14 ladies, are very significant.

15           They show the enormous economic value that these  
16 well organized and administered programs can bring to a  
17 state. The present system has failed us. We missed the  
18 boat. Statistics will show in this that the states with  
19 the separate departments are the most successful. Other  
20 states are following their way. In the top 15 large  
21 states, 10 have separate departments, and Texas, a  
22 commission that acts like one.

23           Pennsylvania and Michigan are the only  
24 Department of Military and Veterans Affairs and are 11 and  
25 15 in performance respectively when it comes to per capita

1 benefits and services and also total expenditures in the  
2 state. The Governor of Ohio just signed a bill last week  
3 creating a separate veterans' department, and we should  
4 follow suite. There is another very important point that  
5 you have to consider.

6           You will hear from a witness who was our  
7 Adjutant General for eight years, and that period of his  
8 administration was during the Persian Gulf War. This is  
9 not covered in the studies. We asked how will the Guard,  
10 with its federal and state missions, do if the Bureau is  
11 put into a separate department. You will hear him say  
12 unequivocally that they will do better.

13           In this bill, the new department secretary has  
14 two proposed bureaus, one for veterans' homes in which the  
15 bill would transfer the existing homes and the Scotland  
16 Veterans School, and a bureau for veterans' benefits  
17 assistance to which the existing state benefit programs  
18 will be transferred and under which additional service  
19 officers to handle federal benefits will be assigned, most  
20 of whom will work in various public places in the field.

21           The bill continues the existing State Veterans  
22 Commission with some important functional revisions. It  
23 recommends that four legislators be members, giving the  
24 majority and minority leaders the responsibility of  
25 selecting four members at large. It strips the Commission

1 of its administrative duties. It also creates a Veterans  
2 Organization Advisory Council to assist the work of the  
3 Commission. The advisory councils to the veterans' home  
4 remain and are made bipartisan by increasing the number of  
5 legislators from two to four.

6           The Veterans Outreach Centers remain, but they  
7 are placed under the control of the Department. The study  
8 found that they were operating without supervision or  
9 direction. The research that has been done shows that only  
10 10 states place their veterans' affairs under a military  
11 department, and 29 states now have separate veterans'  
12 departments, including Ohio.

13           One of our exhibits is a chart that may be  
14 presented showing all the states, their veteran population  
15 and the type of governance they have. You'll note that  
16 only 4 of the 29 states have veteran populations larger  
17 than our own. It seems very clear that we cannot maintain  
18 the status quo. Some others have suggested that the  
19 present Bureau be given additional service officers, saving  
20 the cost inherent in creating the new department.

21           That takes the narrow view that all that is  
22 needed are more service officers. You cannot execute the  
23 larger vision of the new department, and you will not be  
24 able to execute the many actions that must be done without  
25 a cabinet secretary and his enlarged role, as I have

1 described it. The study reports a system failure, a  
2 failure of the Bureau and a failure of other systems that  
3 are part of the whole system.

4 Those failures would be left unresolved. There  
5 are others who will raise questions of the added costs.  
6 First, the added costs are not as large as some claim. The  
7 Legislative Bureau and Finance Commission study has a  
8 section on fiscal, budget and manpower analysis. We will  
9 present one that we did and which comes close to the other  
10 study.

11 The bottom line is the added costs of the new  
12 department will be about \$3.35 million above the 2008-2009  
13 budget with the additional personnel. This is a very small  
14 amount compared with the tremendous benefits our veterans  
15 will get which will far exceed the added cost.

16 Everyone recognizes that we, the state, have for  
17 too long tried to do this more cheaply. The time has come  
18 to do it right. The time has come to meet the needs of our  
19 veterans. Thank you very much.

20 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Thank you, Representative  
21 Siptroth.

22 Our first testifier will be General Jessica  
23 Wright, the Adjutant General.

24 General Wright?

25 MS. WRIGHT: Thank you, Chairman Grucela.

1                   On behalf of the Department of Military and  
2 Veterans Affairs, I am pleased to present this statement on  
3 House Bill 344. This legislation would split the current  
4 Department of Military and Veterans Affairs into two  
5 separate executive departments; a Department of Military  
6 Affairs, which would be headed by the Adjutant General, and  
7 a Department of Veterans Affairs, which would be headed by  
8 a new Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

9                   Let me start off by saying again what I and  
10 Governor Rendell have said in the past. We all want what  
11 is best for the veterans and their families. If a separate  
12 Department of Veterans Affairs can be shown to improve  
13 services for our veterans and their families, then we  
14 should all support the concept.

15                   However, based upon what we know now, I don't  
16 believe that anyone anywhere has shown that an  
17 organizational structure of state government is a factor in  
18 determining the level of services provided to our veterans.  
19 I believe Pennsylvania's doing a tremendous job in  
20 providing services to our veterans and their families.

21                   We have made great strides in the last few  
22 years. We are taking steps, both in terms of organization  
23 and operation to ensure that we do better in the future.  
24 In terms of advocacy for our veterans' programs and a high  
25 level of attention to our veterans' needs, our record is

1 unmatched. Governor Ed Rendell has personally met with the  
2 leader of our veterans' service organizations on four  
3 separate occasions at the Governor's residence.

4           These meetings have included the Auditor General  
5 Jack Wagner, and veterans' leaders from across  
6 Pennsylvania. They have produced real and tangible  
7 results. The exchange of views at these meetings has  
8 resulted in major legislative initiatives to support our  
9 veterans and improve our veterans' services in  
10 Pennsylvania.

11           The General Assembly has amassed a top-notch  
12 record of addressing veterans' concerns and supporting  
13 improvements to the veterans' programs. I want to thank  
14 you and all the members of the House and the Senate for  
15 your strong support of veteran initiatives. Today's  
16 warriors are the veterans of tomorrow.

17           The Department of Military and Veterans Affairs  
18 currently oversees 19 thousand men and women who proudly  
19 serve their nation and their state in the Pennsylvania Army  
20 and Air National Guard, and we oversee veterans' programs  
21 that serve Pennsylvania's 1.1 million veterans and their  
22 families. I firmly believe that there's a real synergy  
23 that arises from the inherent relationship between the  
24 military and the veteran affairs.

25           The way the world works today makes it even more



1 important than ever for us to communicate to all of our  
2 military members, whether they're Active Duty, Guard or  
3 Reserve, about veterans' benefits. And I believe we're  
4 doing a great job in this area. The benefits of synergy  
5 are also shown in extensive participation of the  
6 Pennsylvania National Guard leaders, units and personnel in  
7 veteran and community events.

8           These parades, ceremonies, speeches and  
9 briefings demonstrate the way the Guard programs and the  
10 veterans' programs work together to benefit both. In the  
11 last year alone, Pennsylvania National Guard personnel,  
12 units and equipment participated in 345 veterans' events  
13 across Pennsylvania.

14           The recently-improved changes in the  
15 Department's organizational structure recognizes the  
16 importance of our veterans' programs and their central  
17 place in our Department. Our organizational structure was  
18 recently updated for the first time in many years. The  
19 newly-established Office of the Deputy Adjutant General for  
20 Veterans Affairs is headed by Brigadier General Scott  
21 Wagner, who is with me today.

22           The office consists of two bureaus under General  
23 Wagner. We've been working for years to right size the  
24 organizational structure of our veterans' affairs within  
25 our Department, and I believe we have now succeeded;

1 similarly, the organization of our Department's  
2 administrative function under a Deputy for Administration  
3 and our facilities function under a Deputy for Facilities  
4 and Engineering to enhance the support of these vital  
5 functions to provide veterans' programs throughout the  
6 Commonwealth.

7           When you look at our state veterans' programs,  
8 the last couple of years have been marked with tremendous  
9 progress. With no additional staffing or funding, we've  
10 implemented a new Merchant Marine Veterans' Compensation  
11 Program that paid over 1,173 merchant mariners from World  
12 War II, a bonus of \$5 hundred. Our total payment for this  
13 program is \$586,500.

14           We've implemented the new Persian Gulf Conflict  
15 Veterans' Compensation Program enacted by the General  
16 Assembly and approved by the voters of Pennsylvania. Since  
17 we started receiving applications in March, we've received  
18 nearly 2,900 applications. Our first bonus payments were  
19 made on the 5th of April, 2008, and so far, we've paid out  
20 \$870,400.

21           We currently have 890 applications pending.  
22 Using a contractor to administer this program, we are  
23 providing great service to the Persian Gulf Conflict  
24 veterans. We've implemented changes to the Real Estate Tax  
25 Exemption Program for certain disabled veterans, which the

1 General Assembly approved in 2006.

2           Since the statutory change in how we calculate  
3 financial need for the exemption, the number of exemption  
4 property owners by 100 percent disability veterans and  
5 their spouses increased from 1,950 to 2,905 in the last two  
6 years. Our six state veterans' homes continue to be a  
7 source of tremendous service to our veterans and their  
8 families. At Governor Rendell's request, the General  
9 Assembly approved a new approach to budgeting for the  
10 veterans' homes in fiscal year '05-'06.

11           We now incorporate all six veterans' homes into  
12 one line item rather than six separate appropriations.  
13 This has allowed our veterans' homes to operate more  
14 efficiently by planning for their needs as an enterprise.  
15 It allows for the movement of funds between homes, and if  
16 necessary, reduce the potential deficit in any one home due  
17 to the varying revenue streams and to permit funding of  
18 strategic purchases and construction and renovation.

19           We have initiated the Enhanced Veterans  
20 Reimbursement Program for our veterans' homes. This  
21 approach will allow us to increase the augmented federal  
22 funds by identifying residents of our homes who already  
23 qualify for medical assistance programs. Implementation of  
24 this program should be largely transparent to our veterans.

25           We will continue to admit veterans in the same

1 way and to collect maintenance fees to offset a portion of  
2 their cost and care. In September 2007, we dedicated a  
3 372-bed dementia unit addition in the Pennsylvania  
4 Soldiers' and Sailors' Home in Erie, which gave specialized  
5 care and therapies to those in need in a safe and secure  
6 environment.

7           DMVA is in the process of contracting for a  
8 needs analysis and feasibility study for a seventh  
9 veterans' home in Pennsylvania. I expect the contract to  
10 be awarded for this important study within the next few  
11 weeks. At Scotland School for Veterans Children, we  
12 continue to make substantial strides in upgrading the  
13 physical plant.

14           Overall, construction projects totaling over \$20  
15 million have been undertaken or are planned for Scotland  
16 School. Scotland School continues to graduate outstanding  
17 students who are moving into their adult lives with  
18 opportunities, the result of a solid foundation, the  
19 administration, trustees, faculty members and others create  
20 each year.

21           On 7 June, Scotland School will graduate 25  
22 students; 24 of whom are going on to college, and one is  
23 enlisting in the Marine Corps. What's more, Scotland  
24 School has met all the requirements of the No Child Left  
25 Behind guidelines for the last two years, and we are

1 confident that the school will once again make progress  
2 this year.

3 Other state veterans' programs, such as the  
4 veterans' emergency assistance, the blind and paralyzed  
5 veterans' pension programs and the educational gratuity  
6 program continue to function well. I understand that the  
7 General Assembly is considering legislation to make further  
8 improvements in these programs. The commitments to  
9 veterans and their families have been matched with funding.

10 From fiscal year '03-'04 to fiscal year '08-'09,  
11 Pennsylvania's spending on veterans' programs has increased  
12 from \$74 million to \$104 million, an increase of 31  
13 percent. Some may argue that attracting federal dollars  
14 for veterans' benefits is a problem area and Pennsylvania  
15 is behind where it should be.

16 I agree that no report on how we're doing in  
17 providing veterans' services in Pennsylvania would be  
18 complete without addressing the issue of how we are doing  
19 in attracting federal payments to our veterans. When  
20 veterans are assisted by well-trained, capable veterans'  
21 service officers in filing their federal compensation and  
22 pension claims, they ordinarily receive a much higher award  
23 recognizing all aspects of their services connected to  
24 disability.

25 Representation of veterans who file their claims

1 by a service officer holding the veteran's power of  
2 attorney is a significant factor. A recent report prepared  
3 by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs  
4 indicate that nationwide, veterans with a POA  
5 representative received an annual reward of \$11,162, while  
6 those with no POA received an average of only \$4,728. The  
7 Commonwealth is advancing efforts to enhance the veterans'  
8 service officer programs on several fronts.

9           Recognizing the importance of veterans' service  
10 office assistance to our veterans, DMVA now employs 13  
11 veterans' service officers to better serve our veterans.  
12 We have more than tripled VSOs employed by this Department  
13 in the last three years.

14           Working together with the General Assembly and  
15 our veterans' groups, we've implemented the new Veterans  
16 Service Officer Grant Program for Pennsylvania veterans'  
17 service organizations in the current state fiscal year.  
18 The purpose of this program is to sustain and improve  
19 veteran service officer support within this Commonwealth.

20           We awarded about \$450 thousand in grants to our  
21 veterans' groups for the current fiscal year, and the  
22 Governor's Executive Budget for State Fiscal Year 2008-2009  
23 includes 1.7 million for this program. We have already  
24 received grants, applications for this coming fiscal year,  
25 '08-'09. We hope that the Governor's recommendation will

1 be included in the final budget enacted by our General  
2 Assembly.

3 I note, however, that House Bill 344 defines  
4 veterans' services officers in a way that seems to include  
5 the VSOs who work for our state veterans' service  
6 organizations from that definition. What's more, the bill  
7 makes no reference to the new veterans' service  
8 organization grant program. I believe this is a serious  
9 mistake.

10 We are working with our private, nonprofit  
11 veterans' groups to improve services to our veterans and  
12 their families. This is a new program, and I believe the  
13 veterans' service organization officers are an important  
14 part of the mix that can provide the best service to our  
15 veterans. During fiscal year '07-'08, 60 of the 67  
16 Pennsylvania counties increased the amount of compensation  
17 and pension payments that their veterans receive.

18 Veterans' service officers include those  
19 assigned to DMVA, and those employed as County Directors of  
20 Veterans' Affairs as well as those working with our  
21 veterans' organizations, assisted by Pennsylvania veterans  
22 in realizing compensation and pension awards that total  
23 about \$1.2 billion in the last three fiscal years. It is  
24 true that there is some variation among states' veterans'  
25 benefits.

1           While we have been doing a great job with the  
2 new claims over the past few years, long-term averages are  
3 based upon 60 years of claims history. The variation in  
4 average awards among the state depend on several factors,  
5 such as military retiree status, period of service, type of  
6 disability and veterans' service officer assistance.

7           No study of which I'm aware cites the evidence  
8 to show that an organizational structure of the state  
9 government is a statistically-significant factor in the  
10 variance of federal veterans' compensation among the  
11 states.

12           The data indicate that the observed variation  
13 across the states has existed for at least 35 years. I  
14 heard it said that while I am a great friend of the  
15 veterans and the veterans' programs, that I don't have time  
16 to be an advocate for veterans' programs because of the war  
17 demands of our National Guard and related issues. I simply  
18 disagree.

19           As I pointed out, we've made tremendous strides  
20 in our veterans' programs during this time. I believe no  
21 Governor, no Administration and no Adjutant General has  
22 devoted as much time in working with veterans'  
23 organizations or addressing their issues.

24           I believe our advocacy for our veterans and  
25 their families has shown in the results that we have



1 produced, not just bringing the federal benefits, which is  
2 very important, but also expanding our state programs and  
3 re-organizing our Department to do even a better job.

4           From an operational and mission-accomplishment  
5 viewpoint, any benefits from a separate Department of  
6 Veterans' Affairs depends entirely on how a separate  
7 department is funded and how it operates. There is a  
8 general agreement that a separate department that is not  
9 adequately funded would be no better or potentially worse  
10 than the current structure.

11           In conclusion, let me say that I am sure the  
12 advocates of a second department share with me and Governor  
13 Rendell the goal of providing the best services in an  
14 effective and cost-efficient manner. I believe we're doing  
15 a great job in serving Pennsylvania veterans and that our  
16 initiatives are evident of that job.

17           Thank you again for the opportunity to make this  
18 presentation. I'm joined today by Brigadier General Scott  
19 Wagner, Deputy Adjutant General for Veterans Affairs, and  
20 we would be happy to respond to any of your questions.

21           CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Thank you, General Wright. I  
22 would note that Representative Ron Miller from York County  
23 has joined us. We'll start the questioning with my  
24 Co-Chair, Representative Beyer.

25           REPRESENTATIVE BEYER: Just very briefly,

1 General Wright, you know, I know that you believe that you  
2 have done and the Governor has done well, but I would put  
3 to you that in the past two or three sessions, no General  
4 Assembly has done more for veterans.

5 MS. WRIGHT: Yes, ma'am, I mentioned that in my  
6 remarks.

7 REPRESENTATIVE BEYER: And -- well, I mean, much  
8 of the legislation, much of the programs that you outlined,  
9 we, first of all, are all fully aware of because we  
10 established them. So I find it just a little troubling  
11 that the report that we're going to now base our proposed,  
12 or what Representative Siptroth is basing this report on  
13 was really not addressed by you.

14 And that troubles me a bit because it seems to  
15 me as though if you are, as you say you are, and I believe  
16 you are an advocate for veterans -- and statistics are  
17 clear. You're saying that there's no statistical evidence  
18 that having a separate department doesn't do anything, any  
19 more for veterans. Well, that's the whole basis of this  
20 report.

21 And you're talking to someone that lived in  
22 Texas, that lived in Florida, that lived in Ohio, all heavy  
23 veteran states. And they do far, far more, and I can tell  
24 you that from personal experience. So I would like to know  
25 exactly how much research you have done and how many other

1 states have you personally met with to examine what their  
2 departments look like.

3 I mean, how much have you gone outside of the  
4 box to see if maybe there aren't some more things in the  
5 state of Pennsylvania we could do. And additionally, I'm  
6 not sure I quite understand your opposition, and I think  
7 you are a very vocal opponent of this proposal. And I  
8 think that's unfortunate because it seems to me as though  
9 you do have many duties.

10 I sit across from you PEMA hearings; we sit on  
11 Guard issues; we sit on veterans' issues, and you're the  
12 spokesman for all three. And it seems to me that you would  
13 want this kind of additional assistance, especially if the  
14 General Assembly is willing to invest the money.

15 MS. WRIGHT: Ma'am, I said that in my remarks,  
16 that I am absolutely in favor of a separate department if  
17 it pans out to do better veterans' benefits and  
18 organization. I have absolutely no qualms about a separate  
19 veterans' department. If it is best for veterans, then I  
20 am all for it. Absolutely.

21 REPRESENTATIVE BEYER: Well, I suppose then what  
22 I would like to see from your remarks and what I would like  
23 to challenge you to do is to balance it. What you do in  
24 your testimony and anything that I have seen that you have  
25 produced out of your office is why it shouldn't be done,

1 but I would like to hear how you might see that this could  
2 potentially benefit veterans in this Commonwealth.

3 I mean, I would like to see a balanced approach,  
4 and not one of kind of protecting the status quo. Now, as  
5 a legislator, as I said to you, and all of us sit here, we  
6 address veterans' issues just about every day in our  
7 offices, inquiries, folks not knowing where they're  
8 supposed to go, not knowing who they're supposed to  
9 contact. We're not misinforming people about that.

10 That is the facts. We also have in the  
11 Department of Labor and Industry that has a Governor's  
12 Veterans Outreach, something you don't mention at all, but  
13 they have a very heavy case load.

14 MS. WRIGHT: Yes, but the Governor's Outreach by  
15 Labor and Industry, we can certainly assume that  
16 responsibility. Should we assume that responsibility, we  
17 assume no funding that comes with that responsibility. The  
18 grant is given to Labor and Industry specifically, so that  
19 would be another funding issue that you would deal with.

20 And I will assume that outreach program in a  
21 heartbeat to combine veterans' service organizations and  
22 programs in my Department, but I must also beg for you to  
23 give me the money to run that because no money will come.  
24 The people, the responsibility and the organization would  
25 come, but the money wouldn't come. So if you're willing to

1 fund it, ma'am, I'm willing to take it.

2 REPRESENTATIVE BEYER: Well, the funding  
3 continues to be cut year after year, but --

4 MS. WRIGHT: No, the funding would not come at  
5 all because it is a grant that goes to Labor and Industry.

6 REPRESENTATIVE BEYER: I recognize that. I  
7 recognize that, but it is a separate program that sits out  
8 there that are doing the exact same things that the veteran  
9 service officers in the county. They're filing benefits  
10 claims. When I advertise, when I get a Veterans Outreach  
11 gentleman from my region to come to my office, I get a line  
12 of people out the door.

13 I get consistent complaints from veterans about  
14 their access to prescription drugs. There are more demands  
15 upon the services of legislators related to veterans that  
16 you don't even talk about; homelessness, lack of  
17 prescription drug and medical care access, all kinds of  
18 issues.

19 So it goes far more than what your statement  
20 applies, and none of those issues ever appear to get  
21 addressed in correspondence or anything that you discuss.  
22 There's far more going on. I recognize all the grant  
23 programs. We established them. We know about that. But  
24 what about the demands that veterans are -- what about the  
25 needs of veterans that we're not discussing?

1           And that's the whole point of why Representative  
2 Siptroth introduced this legislation. It's not just about  
3 bonus programs. It's not just about educational programs.  
4 It's about whether or not veterans have access to  
5 prescription drugs, whether or not they have access to  
6 proper vocational training, whether or not they are  
7 homeless. It's those kinds of issues that your legislators  
8 sitting before you are dealing with. So thank you.

9           Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

10           MS. WRIGHT: No response.

11           CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Representative Youngblood?

12           REPRESENTATIVE YOUNGBLOOD: I echo the concerns  
13 that Representative Beyer has because I have experienced  
14 some of the same things in my district also, including my  
15 ex-husband is from the Vietnam era and served, in trying to  
16 get benefits for him, just general benefits and services.

17           And I've talked to Rick a number of times when I  
18 have veterans come into my office because the alleged  
19 veterans' groups that they have in the City of Philadelphia  
20 apparently aren't doing anything. And what I find  
21 disparaging is that a lot of Afro-Americans, Hispanic and  
22 other minority veterans, they're not getting represented  
23 properly.

24           And when they come in and they ask me questions,  
25 I'm at a loss, and I'm stumbling through trying to find

1 help. And I know sometimes I probably get on Rick's nerves  
2 because I have to call him and ask him for assistance when  
3 I'm not getting the necessary assistance, not even from the  
4 VA. And the VA, the Veterans Administration building on  
5 Wissahickon Avenue, when I send people there -- I met with  
6 the gentleman there -- did absolutely nothing to help  
7 people.

8                   So there is a problem, and I agree. I think  
9 Representative Siptroth's bill will help significantly for  
10 a lot of it because they're stumbling in the dark, and when  
11 they come into our offices because we're in a community,  
12 we're at a loss on how to try to help them. And we do make  
13 the necessary phone calls and ask people to come out, and  
14 they don't show up.

15                   MS. WRIGHT: Have you called our office, ma'am?

16                   REPRESENTATIVE YOUNGBLOOD: Yes.

17                   MS. WRIGHT: And we've not shown up?

18                   REPRESENTATIVE YOUNGBLOOD: I have, no, I have  
19 called your office on different issues on what to do when  
20 someone is filing benefits and the VA alleges that they  
21 lost the claim and the person has to start over, on  
22 different, on how do we really help them with different  
23 issues. And that's very hard because you do have a  
24 legislative affairs person.

25                   And when I contact the legislative affairs

1 person, if I don't get the correct answer, that's when I'm  
2 on the phone with Rick saying, well, what do I do now and  
3 trying in the VA. I mean, it's ridiculous the way the  
4 system to currently set up to really assist our vets. I  
5 mean, I have a lady that has been coming in to see me.

6 I don't remember her name offhand. She was a  
7 career person in the service, and she says nobody wants to  
8 hear her claim on how she was raped repeatedly in the  
9 service. My hands are tied. I don't even know what to  
10 tell her to do.

11 MS. WRIGHT: I would offer you, ma'am, that if  
12 you call our legislative office, I know that you go through  
13 that route, but I would offer you to call directly to  
14 General Wagner. He is the one that runs the veterans'  
15 programs, and I would also offer that I absolutely have no  
16 control over the Veterans Administration. If I did, it  
17 would improve.

18 I have worked with the Veterans Administration  
19 both at the federal level and the Veterans Administration  
20 that are in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. And I don't make  
21 any strides with them, just like you don't make any strides  
22 with them. That is a federally-run program that is  
23 unfunded or not funded at the level that it needs to be  
24 funded. I can't fix that. I can only work with them to  
25 try to get the services for our veterans, and I do that on



1 a daily basis.

2 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Representative Solobay?

3 REPRESENTATIVE SOLOBAY: Thank you, Mr.

4 Chairman.

5 General Wright, I almost wanted to stand up and  
6 clap when you said that because that's the problem that I'm  
7 having trouble understanding. I am a sponsor of  
8 Representative Siptroth's bill, but I have noticed  
9 continually that it seems like between the service officers  
10 that are at the legions and VFWs, the County Veterans  
11 Director, the Governor's Outreach Program that's through  
12 Labor and Industry, things we work through with your  
13 office, the things then on the federal level working with  
14 the -- I'm afraid -- and just what I'm hearing, even with  
15 some of the comments that were mentioned before, if we put  
16 another layer into this thing, we're going to maybe even  
17 make it more bureaucratic and we're still not going to get  
18 anything done.

19 So my thoughts are, as you're attempting with  
20 your Deputy Secretary position now, should it all be led  
21 back in, at least on the statewide things, to try to  
22 develop that coordination between what we provide and what  
23 we are responsible for under the state with that federal  
24 tie. And I understand your frustrations that I deal with  
25 too on the federal side of things.

1           I mean, I'm just wondering, are we maybe trying  
2 to get ahead before we should really tighten up what we  
3 have statewide before we create another bureaucracy? And  
4 that's the only thing that I worry about that will happen.  
5 There's nothing I don't think any of us want to do or  
6 yourself to help provide the best possible things for our  
7 veterans, but some of the things even mentioned from the  
8 previous questions are maybe things that we can't even  
9 control regardless if there's bureaus in place or not.

10           And I know that's a lot of rambling on my part,  
11 but I mean, it just seems that before we create something  
12 new, are we sure that we have things tightened under what  
13 we can control right now?

14           MS. WRIGHT: Sir, I don't negate at all what  
15 Representative Beyer or Representative Youngblood has said.  
16 I agree that there are significant issues in dealing with  
17 our veterans and the services that Representative Beyer and  
18 Representative Youngblood has mentioned. I also believe  
19 that what they have mentioned are federal programs governed  
20 by federal individuals that we cannot change, we can only  
21 help to maneuver.

22           And I believe that we do help our veterans to  
23 maneuver through those systems, but I cannot change the  
24 fact that they lose something or they choose not to do  
25 something or they don't return your phone calls or they

1 don't pay attention to a veteran that shows up. I can't  
2 change that. I can only work with the veteran if I know  
3 there's a problem to get them maneuvered through the  
4 system.

5 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Representative Beyer?

6 REPRESENTATIVE BEYER: You know, head-on as  
7 directly as I can say this to you: I know that you care.  
8 What I want from you is a position of absolute neutrality  
9 at worse.

10 MS. WRIGHT: You have it, ma'am.

11 REPRESENTATIVE BEYER: I want you to understand  
12 that it is already proven by other states that a  
13 cabinet-level secretary works. We're not re-inventing the  
14 wheel here. We already know it works other places. What  
15 we want is Pennsylvania to show that same level of  
16 commitment that many other states have with far less  
17 veterans, with far less veterans.

18 As the Representative clearly outlined what I  
19 thought were some of the best remarks I've heard on this  
20 entire issue, and that's what I want from you. I don't  
21 want you to advocate no on this. I want you to allow the  
22 Legislature to work its way through it. I want you to  
23 respect the fact that we are looking at other states and  
24 seeing what they're getting for their veterans and  
25 realizing that we want to do the same.

1           And if you have to give that up, it seems to me  
2 as though you have the opportunity to pay attention to al  
3 of the other items that you take care of, which are  
4 significantly important as well, which is our Guardsmen,  
5 our emergency management, that whole other area.

6           MS. WRIGHT: I don't do emergency management.

7           REPRESENTATIVE BEYER: So that's what I'm  
8 concerned about is your advocacy against this is what I  
9 find troubling.

10           MS. WRIGHT: I'm very disappointed that you  
11 think that I'm against it because I made my statement in  
12 the beginning that if this is what we need to do, then we  
13 need to do it now, point blank, period. I don't handle  
14 emergency management though; Director French (ph) does.

15           I participate in emergency management absolutely  
16 when -- well, my office participates from a joint EOC  
17 level. When Director French says that he needs X amount of  
18 guardsmen, I provide them, just like I provide them to a  
19 war. I think that I do a very good job of managing all the  
20 positions that I have.

21           However, if you feel and the Legislature feels  
22 that we need a separate department to serve our veterans  
23 better, I agree with that. I will be a veteran in three  
24 years. I will be living in Perry County in Pennsylvania.  
25 My husband is a Vietnam veteran. My son has a four-year

1 scholarship to ROCC to Kings College.

2 He will be a veteran. I would be foolish. My  
3 father is a veteran. I would be foolish not to support the  
4 veterans of Pennsylvania. I just would be foolish. So I  
5 agree 100 percent, if a Department of Veterans Affairs is  
6 the way to go, then let's do.

7 REPRESENTATIVE BEYER: Then you'll see as a  
8 veteran what it's like.

9 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Representative Siptroth?

10 REPRESENTATIVE SIPTROTH: Thank you, Mr.  
11 Chairman.

12 Thank you, General Wright and General Wagner for  
13 being here today. I would really like to open the door.  
14 And I'm not going to bring out specifics of happenings in  
15 my district office, but there are very, very many. And  
16 they're very, very frustrated as to why they're not being  
17 handled.

18 And, yes, a lot of them are federal issues, but  
19 I still think that the avenue could be there if we had a  
20 separate department to address some of those federal  
21 issues. And I will readily admit that the language in the  
22 current bill was pre-Act 66, and the bill is a bill which  
23 certainly can be amended.

24 And I would look forward to working with your  
25 Department and General Wagner in revising that bill and

1 working with it so we can incorporate the other activities  
2 that are in Act 66. Thank you.

3 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

4 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Thank you. Just one  
5 question, General Wright. You mentioned in your testimony  
6 that there were changes to the Disabled Veterans' Property  
7 Tax Exemption. Were these significant, or could you  
8 elaborate what those changes were?

9 MS. WRIGHT: They were significant. Instead of  
10 two years, we go to five years now. I would say that I  
11 believe that once we prove a disabled veteran is 100  
12 percent disabled, they should go longer than five years so  
13 that veteran doesn't have to renew that all the time, every  
14 five years.

15 Five years goes very fast, and so if they've  
16 proven they're disabled and they've proven their  
17 income -- and I suspect, and I'm going out on a limb here,  
18 that most people at that stage, they don't, their income  
19 doesn't increase significantly, that they would be managed  
20 within the system, that we could do better if we would give  
21 them the latitude of that 10 years or 15 years on that  
22 particular disabled, or Real Estate Tax Exemption Program.

23 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: It takes a long time. Have  
24 we shortened the time frame?

25 MS. WRIGHT: We have. We're working diligently

1 to do that. It's bureaucratic based upon the fact of all  
2 the things that we need to verify. And that's why I'm  
3 saying, if we eliminate some of those time frames, we won't  
4 have to have the veterans verify them every five years.  
5 They're 100 percent disabled. They will be 100 percent  
6 disabled in five years.

7 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: I ask that because I had a  
8 constituent who went through the process, and it took them  
9 six months to get an answer. And after six months, he was  
10 denied, but for whatever reason, it worked out that he was  
11 denied under the legitimate guidelines. But a six-month  
12 period, can we shorten that?

13 MS. WRIGHT: Yes, sir. What we're doing is,  
14 because we have increased the eligibility, they are  
15 multiple packets now coming in that we didn't have before.  
16 Our staff didn't increase, not one bit. We're still having  
17 the same amount of people doing that work, but what we're  
18 doing now is when we get those applications in, we triage  
19 them.

20 There are some that could be done in a day. So  
21 we triage those that can be done quickly, and we get them  
22 done quickly. There are those that take more research on  
23 our part and more verification. The applications sometimes  
24 don't come in complete. We need to talk to the veteran and  
25 make sure that they provide us with the correct

1 information.

2           Those though that take a little bit longer, we  
3 can then notify the veteran -- and we are doing  
4 this -- that, listen, it's going to take a little longer  
5 for you; please be patient with us; we're going to talk to  
6 you and keep you informed.

7           CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Thank you, General Wright.

8           Thank you, General Wagner.

9           Our next group is going to be a panel, as I  
10 understand it, so we're pretty close to the time schedule.  
11 What I would do is I would ask you -- I'll announce your  
12 names, and then you can take your seats.

13           And then hopefully I pronounce them correctly,  
14 and if not, I would ask you to re-introduce yourself in  
15 case I mispronounce your name, number one; and number two,  
16 when you're re-introducing yourselves, you can give your  
17 titles. So we have John Getz, General Sajer, Tim Ringgold,  
18 Charles Jackson and Bruce Navarre, Rich Hudzinski and Joe  
19 Zeller.

20           Gentlemen, if you would take your seats at the  
21 panel. We would ask if you could limit your remarks. What  
22 we'll do is the -- we'll follow this format: Of course,  
23 the members may ask at any time a question if you would  
24 like, but I think it might be a little bit expeditious if  
25 we limit your remarks to maybe three or four minutes.



1                   And then we'll go through the entire panel. And  
2 then at the end after the last testifier, we can have  
3 questions from the members to either anyone who wants to  
4 answer from the panel or a specific question addressed to  
5 one of the members of the panel. So we can start with Mr.  
6 Getz, and the panel can introduce yourselves and, of  
7 course, your titles.

8                   MR. GETZ: Mr. Chairman, my remarks actually  
9 goes for somewhere around 18 minutes. Is that acceptable,  
10 sir?

11                   CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: I'm sorry. One second, John.  
12 What's that again?

13                   MR. GETZ: My remarks that I have prepared go  
14 for right around 15, 18 minutes.

15                   CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: One second. Rich Hudzinski  
16 and Joe Zeller are here, if they can join us.

17                   REPRESENTATIVE BEYER: We don't have enough  
18 room.

19                   CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: We have chairs. Just pull  
20 them up.

21                   I'm sorry, John. Go ahead.

22                   MR. GETZ: The remarks that I have prepared are  
23 somewhere around --

24                   CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: If you could summarize, John.  
25 Each person has been allotted 15 minutes, but I'm figuring

1 if we can run through the panel, we will have more time for  
2 the questions that the members may have individually to  
3 each member or upper panel or a collective question that  
4 could be answered by maybe one or two or all of the  
5 particular panel. So I think that would be a good format  
6 to follow.

7 MR. HUDZINSKI: You said that each of us have  
8 worked on statements --

9 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Correct.

10 MR. HUDZINSKI: -- and we have copies that we  
11 have prepared now to hand to the members if you could kind  
12 of go along quickly and also gives you a basis for reading  
13 them and then perhaps asking the questions.

14 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Absolutely. It would be  
15 quicker, I think, to summarize because we can read and then  
16 ask the questions.

17 MR. GETZ: Good morning, Mr. Chairman, members  
18 of the Committee. I'm John Getz of Reinholds in Lancaster  
19 County, Pennsylvania Department Commander of Veterans of  
20 Foreign Wars. With me at the table is VFW's past State  
21 Commander John Brenner of Mt. Wolf, York County, and our  
22 Junior Vice Commander Frank Mills of Hesston in Huntingdon  
23 County, who is also in line for Commander in two years.

24 There are numerous other members of our VFW  
25 leadership in attendance here, and we are proud to

1 represent that largest State Department of Veterans of  
2 Foreign Wars in the nation. There's 120 thousand combat  
3 veterans as our members. We thank the Committee for  
4 holding this hearing which is important to the futures of  
5 our veterans.

6           Going back to 1990, the VFW has championed the  
7 cause for a separate agency in Pennsylvania to provide the  
8 best possible service to veterans. We have no political  
9 agendas or personal reasons for our support of this issue.  
10 The VFW just wants veterans to get the highest level of  
11 support and assistance from our state. Of all  
12 constituencies in the state, Pennsylvania's one million  
13 veterans deserve nothing but the best.

14           A few years ago, our delegates adopted a  
15 resolution to strongly support the creation of a state  
16 agency with a focus solely on veterans' issues. Our  
17 resolution also supports appointing a state cabinet  
18 secretary to head up the agency. We're glad that this  
19 legislative hearing will serve as a catalyst for reviewing  
20 both how veterans are currently served in Pennsylvania and  
21 how a new department can advance service to veterans.

22           We want nothing more and expect nothing less  
23 than the best for veterans. Those who served our nation  
24 and those in uniform did so honorably and by holding  
25 nothing back so we could also have the best possible life.

1 They deserve the same from us. We were very pleased when  
2 Governor Rendell, then a candidate for the office, came to  
3 the VFW members all over the state and told us that, if  
4 elected, he would establish a new Department of Veterans  
5 Affairs.

6           Creating a separate Department of Veterans  
7 Affairs was a major campaign issue for the Governor. House  
8 Bill 344 brings issues into the forefront. The bill should  
9 be seen as one of the most important veterans' bills to  
10 come before you in many years. This bill offers a new  
11 vision to serving veterans, which could lead to a  
12 generation gap forward and how to support our veterans.

13           We have been at war against terrorism for five  
14 years. By all accounts, our nation will broadly engage in  
15 this fight into the future and perhaps in other missions.  
16 This new generation of heroes coming home and those  
17 patriots who served before them represent all that is good  
18 in our state.

19           Let's be proactive and show them that if there's  
20 a better approach to service them, that the state will take  
21 the necessary steps to get it done. Some will be broken in  
22 mind and spirit and may realize that they need support and  
23 services, and others will go back to their civilian lives  
24 unaware of how war will and has impacted their lives. They  
25 can show up years down the road. Most of us, if not all,

1 will need help in one way or another.

2           Their families will need help and deserve the  
3 absolute best assistance should their veteran pass away or  
4 become unable to go through the system on his or her own.  
5 Our states took the initiative to dedicate a government  
6 agency specifically for veterans' needs. It's time that  
7 Pennsylvania uses a department dedicated to veterans with a  
8 veteran as the cabinet secretary to elevate veterans'  
9 service to levels never before seen.

10           The state should look beyond what has worked in  
11 the past to bring service to veterans of all ages and their  
12 families into the modern era. In saying this, we do not  
13 imply any criticism against the Adjutant General or  
14 Administration. Rather, it is our strongly held view that  
15 veterans at the cabinet level, with the power of that  
16 position, whose mind and energies are solely focused on the  
17 needs and interest of our veterans, would serve veterans  
18 best.

19           Today's dual agencies were designed for a prior  
20 era and for a time when juggling military issues and  
21 veterans' issues within the same department was easier.  
22 The demands for overseeing management and state military  
23 assets and veterans' affairs have grown beyond what anyone  
24 could imagine years ago. The VFW calls for veterans,  
25 veterans' groups, lawmakers and state officials to come

1 together to shape the future of veterans' services in  
2 Pennsylvania.

3           Let us work together to maximize and leverage  
4 all of the state's current support systems for veterans  
5 through one agency that will bring everything together  
6 under one agency. The Secretary of Veterans Affairs would  
7 always have the Governor's ear as a member of his cabinet  
8 to make sure that veterans' issues get priority status.  
9 The Secretary will be able to fully focus on the most  
10 important issues to provide one source of contact for  
11 response.

12           For example, the Secretary and a new department  
13 staff would oversee all facilities, all activities and all  
14 services that are for veterans, federal services and  
15 facilities all the way down to issues coordinated by local  
16 governments.

17           Mr. Chairman, our new Secretary will go to our  
18 veterans' hospitals, our VA Outpatient Clinics to see what  
19 more can be done. Our Secretary will be on the phone to  
20 the Secretary of Veterans Affairs in Washington to share  
21 ideas and to address problems. Today's work force demands  
22 skilled workers, and returning veterans need jobs.

23           Veterans need counseling, education and  
24 retraining programs to fill these openings. Our Secretary  
25 will work with our Secretary of Education to see that our

1 veterans are getting the best benefits. Our Secretary will  
2 work with the Secretary of Labor and Industry to assure  
3 that our veterans are getting training and placement  
4 assistance.

5 State counseling should help disabled veterans,  
6 veterans with post traumatic stress disorder and traumatic  
7 brain injuries to find jobs. Anything less than the best  
8 assistance in these areas could result in more veterans  
9 joining the homeless population. Veterans already make  
10 around 25 percent of the homeless. Our Secretary will help  
11 veterans purchase homes and live a productive life.

12 These veterans deserve better than what is  
13 currently available to help them get off the streets. We  
14 appreciate the fact that Act 66 will help expand service  
15 outreach through veterans' organizations. The service  
16 officers hired with grants will direct veterans to  
17 disability and pension claims, but they do not specialize  
18 in other federal programs.

19 We need a veterans' affairs agency that provides  
20 an entire continuum of service for veterans. Since funding  
21 for Act 66 grant program is not guaranteed year-to-year, it  
22 should not be seen as a long-term solution. In fact, if  
23 the grant moneys are cut off or get lower than the  
24 veterans' organizations need, they may have to lay off the  
25 service officers hired through Act 66.

1           The veterans' groups should not have to beg the  
2 Governor and state lawmakers for budget dollars. By  
3 creating a new veterans' affairs agency, you could find a  
4 greater veterans' service outreach through a line item in  
5 the Agency's budget instead of unpredicted grants. Having  
6 an agency that closely monitors and guides veterans through  
7 great range of federal programs would be a valuable asset  
8 for veterans and the state.

9           Act 66 is an important step, for the service  
10 officers funded through it are not experts in all federal  
11 programs that assist veterans. A separate veteran affairs  
12 agency could broaden the service Pennsylvania gives in this  
13 area and bring more federal dollar programs into  
14 Pennsylvania.

15           To be productive in serving veterans, we believe  
16 that the state should always be researching out how it  
17 identifies, studies and reacts to veterans' needs. This  
18 requires looking at the program models from other states  
19 for directions.

20           Mr. Chairman, the time has changed rapidly. A  
21 decade or more ago, our veterans' greatest need was for  
22 veterans' homes. In a very caring and generous way, the  
23 state Legislature gave our veterans a first-class veteran  
24 home system. We believe that having a separate veterans  
25 affairs agency and Secretary would energize the entire



1 veterans' community in a similar way.

2           As a Commander, I travel to our Posts all over  
3 the state and attend events held for veterans and military  
4 personnel. As I do, I talk to people about creating a  
5 separate Department of Veterans Affairs, and I hear that  
6 it's about time. A few years ago, the major veterans'  
7 groups in the state rallied behind this cause.

8           Collectively, they agreed that creating a new  
9 agency was the top legislative priority of the Pennsylvania  
10 War Council. Some veterans' groups think that the grant  
11 money from Act 66 has changed the entire landscape. The  
12 VFW thanks the state for creating the grant program, and we  
13 take great pride in connecting veterans with their federal  
14 benefits.

15           However, we also realize that this is not the  
16 only area of service that veterans should receive. Some  
17 may think that the latest independent study was not of  
18 value for addressing the need for a separate veterans'  
19 affairs agency. While we agree that the study could have  
20 been stronger, the results did identify numerous key issues  
21 that the state needs to respond to for veterans to be able  
22 to be served best.

23           Let's keep the momentum going and do what is  
24 best for our veterans. I represent 120 thousand combat  
25 veterans who expect the best services and support that the

1 state can provide. You should consider that a large  
2 percentage of Pennsylvania veterans don't belong to any  
3 veteran groups represented here, but they still belong to a  
4 band of veteran brothers and sisters.

5           We have the obligation to look after their best  
6 interest. If we are here to guarantee our veterans that  
7 the state government will stop at nothing to give them the  
8 best services and support, then we should be open to using  
9 a new concept or strategy to get this there fast. The VFW  
10 believes that the state's treatment and support of veterans  
11 is so important that it should not be subjected to  
12 political games or quid pro quo arrangements. We hope  
13 everybody agrees.

14           We believe there are too many positive things  
15 going on in other states not to consider moving forward  
16 with a new approach to give veterans the best they can  
17 offer. Pennsylvania's proud tradition of military services  
18 stands head and shoulders above the rest of our nation.  
19 Our system for handling veterans should do the same.

20           Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the chance to speak  
21 today. I ask for your indulgence for one minute while my  
22 State Adjutant John Benner reminds Committee members about  
23 some research released by Auditor General Jack Wagner after  
24 statewide series of veterans' meetings that were held with  
25 Senator Bob Casey a few years ago.

1 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Thank you, Commander.

2 MR. BENNER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

3 Committee members, a few years ago, Auditor  
4 General Wagner released his report called Pennsylvania  
5 Veterans' Breakfast. In the introduction, which was  
6 written by former Adjutant General John Patton, Mr. Patton  
7 wrote this, and I quote: In many instances, the same  
8 issues arose at every meeting, such as the need for a  
9 separate Department of Veterans Affairs with a  
10 cabinet-level rank of Secretary within the State's  
11 Executive Branch, end of quote.

12 And under the section called statewide consensus  
13 issues, the number one item, and I quote again, to  
14 establish a separate Department of Veterans Affairs with  
15 the Secretary of cabinet rank and to provide adequate  
16 funding for the transition and the operation of this new  
17 department, end of quote.

18 And lastly, under the section of general  
19 comments, the text includes the quoted material, veterans  
20 said that they believe their concerns were many, many times  
21 overlooked. They also said that the state and federal  
22 officials were sometimes falling short in communicating  
23 with our veterans.

24 Then the text continued by stating that numerous  
25 veterans said that at a cabinet level, veterans' Secretary

1 would help address these issues, like cutting through the  
2 red tape and delivering more assistance more conveniently  
3 and faster to our veterans.

4 That section ends by noting that veterans do not  
5 want to see funding for other veterans' programs reduced in  
6 any way to pay for the formation of a new department. And  
7 I thank you, Mr. Chairman, and the Committee members for  
8 allowing us to include these important report conclusions  
9 in our testimony. Thank you, sir.

10 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Thank you. Before I call on  
11 General Sajer, we're doing a good job about this, but make  
12 sure when you gentlemen testify that the green light is on  
13 the microphone. And then -- so far we're doing a good job,  
14 but sometimes in this room, people testifying and members  
15 forget to push the light to have the green button.

16 Okay. General Sajer?

17 MR. SAJER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

18 I am Major General Gerald T. Sajer, retired. I  
19 have 49 years of service in Active, Guard and Reserve. I  
20 was a ranger captain of the Korean War, and my last  
21 military assignment, I was Adjutant General under Governor  
22 Casey. As a trial lawyer, I'm going to try to respect your  
23 wish that I reduce 15 minutes to 4.

24 In a nutshell, when I got to be the Adjutant  
25 General in 1987, we had a Guard of about 24 thousand. We

1 had a small department with really only two nursing homes.  
2 The big demand at that time from the veterans'  
3 organizations was for more veterans' care in nursing homes.  
4 We had a much larger population than we have today.

5           So that was our priority. And we went from two  
6 to six, and you can see the number of beds went from  
7 3-hundred-and-something to 16 hundred. The number of  
8 employees went up and so forth. We didn't have the  
9 Scotland School. The Scotland School was then added to  
10 that.

11           And then we're looking at this realm from the  
12 perspective of today. I see three broad trends which  
13 affect this division; first is the military because of the  
14 war. The old Guard was two -- a weekend a month, two  
15 weeks, summer. That old Guard is gone. There was a big  
16 mission change. We used to be in what we called the  
17 strategic reserve, and we only had to train one weekend a  
18 month.

19           Now we're in operational reserve, and what that  
20 means, we have a Guard of continuing deployments. Yes, I  
21 was there during the Persian Gulf War, but we only deployed  
22 a few hundred guys. Today we're deploying them by the  
23 thousands. I spoke to one Battalion Commander, and I was  
24 asking about how retention was. He said, sir, what are you  
25 talking about; my battalion has been deployed three times

1 in five years; how many of the old guys you think are going  
2 to continue to stay with me.

3           What I'm saying is you have a whole new range of  
4 problems, and we have to create a new culture for the new  
5 Guard. And that's all beyond the plate out there. Now,  
6 the second trend is this: You all know the large functions  
7 of national disasters at home, but you have to add another  
8 today, and that's the terrorism.

9           I don't think we've even scratched in this state  
10 and many others this whole issue of homeland security,  
11 homeland defense and emergency operations. I was at the  
12 hearing the other day for part of the time where you were  
13 considering changes to PEMA and so forth, although I didn't  
14 get 60 amendments, and I can't find anybody who does.

15           But that's a critical area, and that's why they  
16 impact heavily on the Adjutant General in his department as  
17 they begin to address these things. The third trend, as I  
18 said before, we talked about veterans' homes. Today, the  
19 big issue in veterans is claims and services, and they're  
20 not state claims and services.

21           The arena has switched to the federal  
22 government. That's what you'll see in the other states.  
23 It's federal now. And it's not just for pensions and  
24 disability. It's the whole range of services. As I speak  
25 to you today, my best information, we have over 60 thousand

1 Pennsylvanians who have returned from the Persian Gulf War.

2           As I state to you today, as of yesterday, there  
3 were 9,700 Pennsylvanians in Iraq. That's all services,  
4 Guard, Active and Reserve. The Army staff tells us, quote,  
5 this is an era of persistent conflict. Notice the word  
6 era, not decade, not year; era of persistent conflict. And  
7 that means we're going to be generating more veterans and  
8 unfortunately more casualties, and all of them are going to  
9 require these services.

10           Act 66 was a good first step, but bear in mind,  
11 as I understand it, these service officers deal in pensions  
12 and disability claims. These new returning veterans, the  
13 first thing they want is a job. They want job training.  
14 They want to hear who's going to pay their bills for  
15 healthcare that they need for things. They're going to  
16 want that whole range of services, which once you create it  
17 under Act 66, is not meant to provide.

18           The veterans' service organizations do not deal  
19 in those areas. And so you have all these new guys coming  
20 back who want this stuff, but we haven't built the  
21 organization that gives it. What I'm telling you is, the  
22 organization that we had was built for a peacetime  
23 capability, but you now must address the demands of this  
24 war time capability that we're now in. I would like to  
25 just read the last two paragraphs, which are short. Okay?

1                   CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: You're well within time.

2                   MR. SAJER: I ask that you not put off the  
3 creation of this new department. The returning young  
4 veterans and their families need the most what this new  
5 department will be able to best provide. I'm not aware of  
6 any good reason not to create it, and I think it would be  
7 an injustice not to take care of these new veterans by  
8 giving them the new department they're going to need.

9                   And then I have this little speech that I've  
10 used before, and I'd love to read it to you. Lastly, let  
11 us always remember this: Men who risk their lives in  
12 combat in the service of our nation deserve a place of  
13 honor above all others in our society, above all others.

14                   Why? Because you see, it was their courage that  
15 made everything else possible for us. They gave us our  
16 country, our independence, our liberty. Today, they  
17 protect our way of life and defend our national interests.

18                   Mr. Chairman, and members of the Committee, I  
19 hope you give our veterans their rightful seat of honor,  
20 give our veterans a place at the table of our highest  
21 executive in the land where their voices can be heard. I  
22 think they've earned it; they deserve it; they need it, and  
23 they've long awaited. Please pass this bill and give them  
24 that seat of honor.

25                   Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd be glad to answer



1 any questions.

2 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Thank you, General. We, like  
3 I said, we would wait until the end to have questions, but  
4 Co-Chair Beyer does have one. And at any time a member  
5 would like to pose a question, certainly we would.

6 Representative Beyer?

7 REPRESENTATIVE BEYER: General, thank you.

8 Thank you all for your service.

9 You are my role model. You were when I was 17  
10 years old when I enlisted in the military, and you are to  
11 this day. You should know that. You're never far from my  
12 thoughts ever. You heard the Adjutant General, and I  
13 thought it was a picture-perfect comment for her to make  
14 because it was indicative to me of attitude.

15 When I said to her you have the responsibilities  
16 of the Guardsmen and the responsibilities of emergency  
17 management, I should have added homeland security. I  
18 didn't; but I said, emergency team management, and she  
19 said, all I do is supply personnel. Now, I just would love  
20 your comment upon that.

21 But I found that deeply, deeply troubling  
22 because, first of all, her role is much more than  
23 personnel, and it should be. In that arena, it should be  
24 because we all know from our military backgrounds that in  
25 an emergency or disaster or some kind of terrorism event,

1 our military folks get it. That's what we train to do.

2 That's what we're prepared to do.

3 That's what we prepared for when we were in the  
4 military. That is absolutely necessary in this whole  
5 process of homeland security emergency preparedness. But  
6 you heard her comment; all she supplies is personnel. Now,  
7 we can go back and get the transcription, but that's what  
8 she said. But I would just love a quick comment on that.

9 MR. SAJER: There is a paragraph, ma'am, in my  
10 statement, the second trend, where I only touch upon  
11 homeland security. But I also have a sentence in there  
12 that says, it's going to be much more important and it's  
13 going to require much more attention than the Adjutant  
14 General's staff and from this Legislature.

15 You're going to have to create a new structure.  
16 It is that important. And people are now talking about the  
17 borders. We have five nuclear plants. We have five major  
18 population areas, and I'm watching carefully what they're  
19 doing with PEMA. And I can tell you -- ladies and  
20 gentlemen, I don't want to be critical of anyone or  
21 anything because everybody's trying to do their best.

22 But I can tell you, we have a lot more work to  
23 do there to get sound plans. The whole key to homeland  
24 security response is the proper organization. Without the  
25 proper organization that can respond -- because it's

1 organized; it has the plan; it's trained to the plan, and  
2 it's ready to go. If you don't have that, you don't have  
3 anything.

4           You lose in the first game if you're not ready.  
5 That's what I'm trying to tell you. And so, you know, I  
6 think it requires a lot more attention than was indicated.  
7 And I don't really think she intended it that way, but  
8 that's what she said.

9           REPRESENTATIVE BEYER: I didn't prepare her  
10 remarks. And, you know, I have sat across from the  
11 Adjutant General, who, you know, I have a great deal of  
12 respect for, everyone who works in that. But, you know,  
13 for her not to say -- and I'm an old military girl  
14 now -- we can do better.

15           To never have that in the remarks drives me a  
16 little crazy quite frankly because I don't get it. And you  
17 know the demands of this homeland security and emergency  
18 preparedness is going to increase, not decrease. And, you  
19 know, we had a St. Valentine's Day disaster on 81 and 78  
20 where we were lucky no one died. That was a disaster.

21           And we all grappled with it and held hearings,  
22 and I would love to see us have a part of our state  
23 government that really focuses on this emergency  
24 preparedness homeland security arena because I don't think  
25 the Adjutant General or -- and you know (inaudible) PEMA,

1 but certainly when counsel promised -- Adjutant General,  
2 absolutely. They should be working in tandem in those  
3 arenas, and I don't know how you can do it all. I don't  
4 know how you can do it and do it effectively.

5 MR. SAJER: I wrote to the Senator after the  
6 Valentine snowstorm and said, it shows you you have a  
7 dysfunctional organization, and I'm saying you're going to  
8 have to address it. That's my strong recommendation.  
9 Thank you.

10 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Thank you, General.

11 Mr. Ringgold?

12 MR. WRIGHT: Mr. Chairman, members of this  
13 Committee, my name is actually Clement Wright, Jr (ph).  
14 I'm a proud retiree from both the military as well as state  
15 government. Yesterday evening, a little after 5, I  
16 received a call from Mr. Tim Ringgold.

17 And Mr. Tim Ringgold called me from Baghdad in  
18 Iraq, and he says, Timmy -- my nickname is Timmy -- would  
19 you please step in for me; I can't make it to the meeting  
20 tomorrow; would you please put on the record my testimony.  
21 And that's my purpose for being here today.

22 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Thanks for that  
23 clarification. It certainly explains it. Thank you for  
24 that clarification, and go ahead with your testimony, sir.

25 MR. WRIGHT: Testimony of Colonel Timothy D.

1 Ringgold, Ph.D., Chief Executive Officer, Defense  
2 Solutions, Inc., before the Veterans Affairs and Emergency  
3 Preparedness Committee, Subcommittee of Military and  
4 Veterans Facilities. Mr. Chairman and members of the  
5 Committee, the firm that I lead prepared the report, a  
6 Comprehensive Study and Review of Veteran Services in  
7 Pennsylvania.

8 I had hoped to testify in person about the study  
9 and its findings, but urgent matters have required me to  
10 remain in Baghdad, Iraq. In lieu of my personal  
11 appearance, I ask that this statement be accepted as my  
12 testimony. Should the Committee wish to have me appear in  
13 person, I will make every attempt to meet with your  
14 schedule in the future.

15 The study team for this project included senior  
16 personnel with a firsthand knowledge with the constituent  
17 audiences throughout the veteran communities. Each had  
18 previously worked for the Department of Military and  
19 Veterans Affairs, the Pennsylvania National Guard, the  
20 Scotland School for Veterans Children and/or other key  
21 government and commercial leaders in Pennsylvania.

22 Each study team member was well known to the  
23 leadership of the DMVA. One had participated in the  
24 earlier study in 1991. The Comprehensive Study and Review  
25 of Veterans Services in Pennsylvania was prepared at the

1 request of Legislative Budget and Finance Committee to meet  
2 the requirements contained in Senate Resolution 124 and  
3 131, both of which passed the General Assembly unopposed in  
4 the summer of 2005.

5           The study team completed its work in June 2006,  
6 made minor adjustments at the Committee's request in  
7 September 2006, and the Committee released the report one  
8 year later in October of 2007.

9           Mr. Chairman, we strongly support removing the  
10 responsibility for handling veterans' issues from under the  
11 Department of Military and Veterans Affairs and the  
12 creation of a separate Department of Veterans Affairs as  
13 proposed in House Bill 344. Recruiting, training,  
14 equipment and deploying military units and sustaining  
15 military operations are increasingly complex tasks.

16           At the same time, veterans' issues continue to  
17 grow in number and complexity, and management of these  
18 issues are more challenging than ever, both for the veteran  
19 and the provider. The skills required to manage military  
20 operations are decidedly different than those needed to  
21 deliver healthcare and other benefit programs to veterans.

22           Just as we would find it incomprehensible to  
23 place a healthcare provider in charge of training and  
24 deploying combat troops or responding to domestic  
25 emergencies, it is just as incomprehensible to put a

1 military commander in charge of caring for an aging  
2 population of veterans.

3           Let's not forget that more than three-quarters  
4 of Pennsylvania's 1.1 million veterans are over the age of  
5 50; one-third are over the age of 70. The skills needed to  
6 care for this population are simply different than those  
7 required in military services. The security of our great  
8 Commonwealth is directly related to the care we provide our  
9 veterans.

10           Simply stated, you cannot recruit a future  
11 military, or retain a current one, if the word gets out  
12 that we do not keep the promises made to those who have  
13 served. With troops on the ground defending our interests  
14 across the globe, keeping faith is not only a prudent  
15 decision, it is the right thing to do.

16           Keeping faith with veterans requires that  
17 adequate resources be in place to provide for the benefits  
18 and services veterans earned through their military  
19 service. Attending to this obligation is one of the  
20 highest priorities in the nation and this Commonwealth. In  
21 our opinion, it ranks with our national defense and  
22 homeland security requirements.

23           President George Washington gave us an eloquent  
24 warning; quote, the willingness with which our young people  
25 are willing to serve in any war, no matter how justified,

1 shall be directly proportional to how they perceive the  
2 veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by  
3 their nation, close quote.

4           When signing the legislation that establish the  
5 U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, President Ronald  
6 Reagan echoed the wisdom of our first president's remarks  
7 as he said, quote, America's debt to those who fight for  
8 her defense doesn't end the day the uniform comes off; for  
9 the security of our nation, it must not end, close quote.

10           At a time when troops are in harm's way  
11 protecting our security and defending our cherished  
12 freedom, the General Assembly should rightly be concerned  
13 with providing the most cost-effective and sufficient means  
14 of administering a wide range of benefits to our  
15 Commonwealth's 1.1 million veterans. The time to act is  
16 now.

17           According to the U.S. Department of Veterans  
18 Affairs and the two years since our study team submitted  
19 its interim findings and recommended the creation of a  
20 Department of Veterans Affairs, some 70 thousand residents  
21 of Pennsylvania who were armed forces veterans have passed  
22 away. As our study reported, the provisioning of veterans'  
23 benefits in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has been a  
24 problem for several decades.

25           Even the most cursory examination revealed



1 inconsistent provisioning of services and benefits and an  
2 arcane and ineffective bureaucracy. During our research,  
3 we encountered many well meaning, but largely untrained  
4 administrators who guide veterans through the bureaucratic  
5 maze to obtain services under federal or Commonwealth  
6 entitlement programs. The healthy and intelligent veterans  
7 often find the system agonizingly painful, bureaucratic,  
8 inconsistent and demeaning.

9           Those in ill health or infirm don't find it that  
10 pleasant. Both the Legislative Budget and Finance  
11 Committee and the study team throughout the project  
12 considered stakeholder input a high priority. Substantial  
13 steps had been taken during the data collection and  
14 discovery phases to interview veterans, veterans' service  
15 organizations, veterans' service officers and  
16 administrators and healthcare providers with a variety of  
17 perspectives and involvement in the veteran delivery system  
18 across the Commonwealth, from the U.S. Department of  
19 Veterans Affairs, the U.S. Department of Labor and state  
20 veterans' organizations from other states.

21           Their collective input was a focal point  
22 throughout the development of this study and was an  
23 essential element in the decision process. The stakeholder  
24 feedback obtained through the distribution and presentation  
25 of the interim study was analyzed by the project study team

1 and incorporated to produce a revised version of the  
2 report.

3           As necessary, the recommendations were  
4 restructured to better align with the long-term and  
5 short-term goals of the Legislative Budget and Finance  
6 Committee. Once Defense Solutions' recommendations for the  
7 enhancement and betterment of veterans' programs and  
8 benefits in Pennsylvania were finalized, the project team  
9 incorporated them in the final study.

10           It was the goal of the project study team that  
11 the final study be written as specifically as possible to  
12 ensure a smooth transition towards a revised veterans'  
13 service delivery system and to provide a suitable framework  
14 for the legislative decision process.

15           The incorporation of stakeholder feedback into  
16 the interim study resulted in minor changes in the findings  
17 and recommendations and substantially increased the focus  
18 of the final report on the structure and support needed to  
19 organize the proposed Department to garner a larger portion  
20 of federal funding.

21           When the Legislative Budget and Finance  
22 Committee released the report last October, the Committee's  
23 cover letter noted that Adjutant General of the Department  
24 of Military of Veterans Affairs objected to the  
25 methodologies and overall approach of the report. When I

1 interviewed General Wright as part of our research, she  
2 stated in clear terms that she would support what is best  
3 for the veterans.

4           Her more-recent data shows that what is best for  
5 the veterans is a separate Department of Veterans Affairs.  
6 In her written statement released as an attachment to our  
7 study, General Wright made a great deal about the, quote,  
8 53 million in additional benefits, new moneys, over the  
9 three years through enhanced outreach, approximately 18  
10 million annually; 4 million in new funding for residents of  
11 our state veterans' homes, and 5 hundred thousand in bonus  
12 payments under the World War II Merchant Marine Veterans'  
13 Bonus.

14           However commendable this improved provisioning  
15 of service may be, it falls far short of the federal  
16 funding that could be obtainable through a well-managed and  
17 well-led Department of Veterans Affairs. As we reported on  
18 page 2 of our study, the potential for additional benefits  
19 for Pennsylvania veterans is in the  
20 multi-hundred-million-dollars-per-year range.

21           From page 2 he cites, if Pennsylvania were to  
22 invest sufficient resources to bring federal spending for  
23 veterans' programs up to the national average, it could  
24 produce nearly 1.4 billion in economic activity in the  
25 Commonwealth every year. With 1.67 million veterans, and

1 significantly more claims officers than Pennsylvania, Texas  
2 averages 3,227 per veteran in federal funding in 2005, an  
3 average of \$863 more per veteran than Pennsylvania  
4 received.

5           If Pennsylvania were to receive what veterans  
6 and veterans' programs in Texas receive, it would total  
7 more than 964 million in direct federal funding and 2.22  
8 billion in economic activity. The discrepancy in veterans'  
9 funding is real and cannot be attributed to geographical or  
10 other environmental discrepancies. For example, New York  
11 has virtually the same number of veterans as Pennsylvania,  
12 1.13 million compared to 1.12 million.

13           Yet last year, according to the U.S. Department  
14 of Veterans Affairs, New York received \$725.6 million more  
15 from the USDVA than did Pennsylvania. In fact, New York  
16 received more federal dollars in every category. It is my  
17 belief, and that of our study team, that a properly  
18 resourced and empowered Department of Veterans Affairs will  
19 better advocate for and represent the needs of Pennsylvania  
20 veterans.

21           The facts prove this point. Other states are  
22 doing it. Pennsylvania could do it as well. Finally,  
23 should the Committee want to discuss our report or any of  
24 the issues related to how best to support Pennsylvania  
25 veterans, we at Defense Solutions stand ready to

1 participate and to assist. Sincerely, Timothy D. Ringgold,  
2 Ph.D., Colonel, U.S. Army, retired, Chief Executive  
3 Officer.

4 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

5 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Thank you.

6 Charles Jackson and Bruce Navarre are the next  
7 group.

8 MR. JACKSON: Thank you.

9 Mr. Chairman, distinguished members of the  
10 Committee, my name is Chuck Jackson, and I live in Lehigh  
11 County. I'm a West Point graduate, and I retired in  
12 Pennsylvania after 20 years' service as an Infantry  
13 Officer. I speak for the Department of Pennsylvania of  
14 Military Order of the Purple Heart, or the MOPH.

15 We're a small organization because of our  
16 membership criteria, but let me assure you that we are well  
17 organized and we are dedicated to the welfare of all  
18 veterans. Last year, our 26 hundred man department spent  
19 over \$333 thousand in support of the Commonwealth's  
20 military veterans and their families.

21 Our service program has only two service  
22 officers, and we lead the Commonwealth on a per service  
23 officer basis, with recoveries from the federal government  
24 of over \$22.7 million. I regret that our Commander, John  
25 Kenes, a combat wounded Marine Corps Master Sergeant, could

1 not address you today because of an automobile accident.

2 I am here to express my organization's support  
3 for this bill. We believe that the present structure that  
4 has failed our veterans cannot be repaired and requires  
5 this new department. The present Bureau of Veterans  
6 Affairs only services about 56 hundred people a year. This  
7 number includes those in our state veterans' homes, the  
8 Scotland School for Children and the various state benefit  
9 programs.

10 The present system overly relies on our service  
11 organizations to do the things that they are not staffed to  
12 do. Their service officers handle only pension and  
13 disability claims. They have no interest in, nor are they  
14 trained to handle all the other federal benefit programs of  
15 interest to our veterans returning from wars now. Some  
16 veterans' organizations, including the Pennsylvania War  
17 Veterans Council, try to lead you to believe that they  
18 speak for all veterans.

19 They do not speak for our organization or many  
20 of the smaller organizations. Furthermore, they do not  
21 speak for the estimated 825 thousand or so veterans who do  
22 not belong to any veterans' service organizations. Of the  
23 1.1 million veterans in the Commonwealth, the American  
24 Legion has fewer than 2 hundred thousand. The VFW has  
25 around 120 thousand. The rest of the organizations are in

1 the low thousands.

2           But the vast majority of veterans belonging to  
3 one organization belong to many. Anecdotal evidence also  
4 tells us that young veteran soldiers returning from today's  
5 war are not joining our organizations. One of the reasons  
6 you need a new department is to reach out to those  
7 unrepresented veterans. The Bureau has no effective  
8 outreach program.

9           Here again, it relies on others, and that is not  
10 working. The new department will have the mission and the  
11 means to reach out, to determine veterans' needs and to  
12 secure for them the entitlements which they have earned.  
13 Let me give you a personal example. I retired from the  
14 Army in 1985 as a lieutenant colonel and was subsequently  
15 awarded a VA disability of 50 percent for mortar fragments  
16 I received in Vietnam.

17           As a career military officer, I prided myself on  
18 being pretty well attuned to my compensation benefits and  
19 my entitlements. But in 2006, I found out by personal  
20 investigation that I was eligible for a higher award based  
21 on the fact that I was married, and I had been married  
22 since 1969. I was subsequently awarded a higher level of  
23 benefit.

24           But where was the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's  
25 Bureau of Veterans Affairs or the County Director of

1 Veterans Affairs to reach out and advise me of the fact  
2 that I was missing out on some of my compensation? Where  
3 was the outreach to me? How many veterans today are being  
4 overlooked right this minute? But my personal story pales  
5 compared to many others. And I would like now for  
6 Mr. Bruce Navarre to relate his story.

7 Bruce?

8 MR. NAVARRE: Let me put my glasses on.

9 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Whenever you're ready, sir.

10 MR. NAVARRE: Okay. My name is Bruce Navarre,  
11 and I'm a lifetime member of the Blinded Veterans  
12 Association as well as the Veterans of Foreign Wars. I  
13 live in Allentown, Pennsylvania, and I'd like to thank you  
14 for letting me tell my story. Basically, neither the state  
15 of Pennsylvania, nor Lehigh County, did anything at all to  
16 help me avoid financial bankruptcy, which I was facing from  
17 disability that I received because of my service in  
18 Vietnam.

19 I served eight years in the Army, and I was  
20 discharged in June of 1970. I was an airborne soldier  
21 serving in the 101st Airborne Division and the 173rd  
22 Airborne Brigade as well as non-airborne units. I served  
23 13 months in Vietnam as a combat engineer. My job involved  
24 clearing trees and other vegetation from roads to reduce  
25 ambushes.



1           The areas that I worked were often sprayed with  
2 Agent Orange to kill the vegetation, and there were over 11  
3 million gallons of herbicides dropped by Air Force aircraft  
4 in Vietnam. It was everywhere, and believe me, I got my  
5 share of it. Around 1985, I was diagnosed with diabetes,  
6 and I started taking pills to control it. Of course, I  
7 bought the bills.

8           In 1995, I was diagnosed with Type II diabetes  
9 and things got much worse. I became legally blind,  
10 received stents in my arteries to treat that condition, and  
11 I had to take insulin injections. I was unemployable, but  
12 I was covered under my wife's medical insurance. And now I  
13 have kidney failure, and I have dialysis three times a  
14 week.

15           But when my wife went on medical disability for  
16 about 18 months, then we had to deal with COBRA for another  
17 6 months. After her COBRA ended, then things really got  
18 desperate for us. I was paying approximately \$47 hundred  
19 per quarter for just my medications, and my wife was  
20 literally going without her medications sometimes.

21           And then there were the bills and food expenses  
22 to worry about also. We had used up our savings. There  
23 was no place to turn to for help. No one from the state  
24 told me that I was entitled to VA Disability or state  
25 benefits like the Blind Veterans Assistance Pension or the

1 real estate tax exemptions. I never even knew until later  
2 that there was a County Director of Veterans Affairs to  
3 turn to.

4 All I knew was I was just going broke paying  
5 from my medications. And then my wife read a small article  
6 in the most unlikely publications of all: The East Penn  
7 Merchandiser, which I still have the article. It was from  
8 someone in Washington D.C. It reached out to blinded  
9 veterans. The state didn't provide an article and reach  
10 out to me; the county didn't do it either, neither did  
11 Pennsylvania organization of the Blinded Veterans  
12 Association.

13 By dumb luck, my wife saw the article. But the  
14 result of that article is that I personally, and without  
15 state, county or veterans' organizations help, submitted a  
16 claim to the VA. I was determined to be over 4 hundred  
17 percent disabled because of Agent Orange. Finally, in  
18 2003, I received a check for \$54 thousand, and now I get  
19 about \$37 hundred per month, plus medical benefits and  
20 prescriptions.

21 With that, we were able to put our lives back  
22 together. I'm telling you my story today because there are  
23 probably a lot of Vietnam veterans in the state who have  
24 disabilities resulting from Agent Orange and have no clue  
25 that they are eligible for benefits. My brother-in-law who

1 passed away was in the unit, the same unit that I was in  
2 Vietnam, died of complications from diabetes. He never got  
3 into the VA system.

4 The state does not have a system to reach out to  
5 veterans. I'm living proof of that. My deep belief is  
6 that a separate Department of Veterans Affairs would have  
7 the mission and means to reach out to people like me who  
8 have no understanding of their entitlements they earned  
9 during their service to their county.

10 I can expand on this by saying that until I  
11 joined the VFW in 2005, I had no idea at all that the state  
12 had any benefits for veterans. Thanks to the VFW post  
13 commander and service officer, I now have Blind Veterans  
14 Pension, and I'm excluded from paying real estate tax.

15 But I didn't learn this from the state or from  
16 the county, so my question to you is why not. Create a  
17 Department of Veterans Affairs, and change that. Thank you  
18 all for letting me tell my story.

19 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Thank you, Mr. Navarre.

20 I'm sorry. Back to you.

21 MR. JACKSON: Thank you, Bruce.

22 Bruce asks, where is the outreach, and the  
23 answer is: There is no mandated program to outreach the  
24 veterans to determine their individual entitlements.  
25 Outreach is the key word. It means find them, not serve

1    them if they come.  Bruce didn't know his diabetes was  
2    presumed by the VA to have been caused by Agent Orange and  
3    that everybody with service in Vietnam is presumed to have  
4    been exposed to Agent Orange.

5                    There are ten other diseases presumed to be  
6    caused by Agent Orange, including prostate cancer.  All of  
7    the 341,650 Pennsylvania Vietnam veterans who have or get  
8    one of these diseases are entitled to medical care and some  
9    level of disability.  How many of them are suffering right  
10   now and don't realize their entitlements?  How many died  
11   without knowing?

12                   It's not the responsibility of the Bureau of  
13   Veterans Affairs to find us and help us.  According to the  
14   Bureau of Veterans Affairs Reference Handbook, they offer  
15   only state benefits and services.  Then whose job is it to  
16   cover federal benefits currently?  No one's.  The  
17   Administration of Veterans Affairs in Pennsylvania today is  
18   broken.

19                   Our returning veterans find a state organization  
20   that is obsolete and incapable of meeting their needs.  For  
21   years, the Bureau has focused on state benefits.  Federal  
22   benefits were just not part of their charter.  Since the  
23   issuance of the LB and FC study, which found many  
24   deficiencies in the present system and recommended the  
25   establishment of a separate department, and since the State

1 Auditor General's December 2006 Breakfast report, and since  
2 the growing prospect that the bill you have in front of you  
3 becomes bigger and better every day, the Bureau has tried  
4 to do a quick makeover to cover some of its most egregious  
5 deficiencies.

6           However, the Department fails to realize that,  
7 as the study finds, the organization and system which has  
8 been in place for so many years is outmoded. It is unable  
9 to address the needs of our veterans in today's  
10 environment. Since the introduction of HB 344's  
11 predecessor, in the last session, the BVA has employed what  
12 is best described in political science lingo as disjointed  
13 incrementalism.

14           That is, they are reacting to problems and  
15 situations to secure a reasonable solution. They're doing  
16 okay, but there is no global strategy. There is no  
17 comprehensive plan. Just like the American Legion and the  
18 VFW and some other organizations did years ago at the  
19 federal level, we must recognize that military affairs and  
20 veterans' affairs are dissimilar, even competing  
21 activities, and they should be separated.

22           Military leadership is complex and demanding.  
23 In the current Global War on Terrorism, we need to allow  
24 our Adjutant General, and future Adjutant Generals, to  
25 focus her full attention on her core mission, which is

1 preparing our National Guard to perform its role as an  
2 operational reserve. Veterans' affairs leadership should  
3 also be a full-time duty of a cabinet-level secretary.

4           Our system is clearly not servicing veterans  
5 nearly as well as the veterans' departments of other  
6 similar states. Looking at the U.S. Department of Veterans  
7 Affairs data, it's obvious that our state's veterans on the  
8 average are very, very low in the receipt of entitlements.

9           Millions and millions, perhaps more than a  
10 billion federal dollars rightfully earned by our veterans  
11 are not being received because they have not been  
12 requested. Our veterans are not so different statistically  
13 from those of New York or Texas or Florida or South  
14 Carolina or other states. Yet those states' veterans get  
15 hundreds of dollars on the average more than our veterans.

16           We have over a million veterans, and that  
17 economic loss to the Commonwealth is egregious. Were those  
18 tax dollars received and then spent in the various sectors  
19 of our state's economy, the tax revenue would most likely  
20 pay for the entire incremental cost of a separate  
21 department and still generate surplus revenue.

22           But federal claims and benefits are not the only  
23 area where Pennsylvania falls short. Let's look for a  
24 minute at our state homes. There is an advisory council  
25 associated with each home. The MOPH feels strongly that

1 the advisory council system of these homes needs to be  
2 revamped. Members of the advisory councils should be  
3 appointed from locales reasonably near the homes so as to  
4 lend a home town flavor to the councils.

5           There's no logic as to why the Commonwealth  
6 should be paying mileage and per diem for a person living  
7 hundreds of miles away to participate on an advisory  
8 council to a home in an area that they don't represent.  
9 The Advisory Board members should be relatively local. It  
10 would advantage the communities in which the homes are  
11 located, and it would advantage the veterans in the homes.

12           And the councils should be independent of the  
13 cabinet-level person in charge of the homes. That  
14 secretary must be available to manage our homes on a  
15 full-time basis, not on a basis where the work week must be  
16 shared with critically important military affairs. And  
17 veterans who are not members of veterans' service  
18 organizations should be eligible to be on a council.

19           Let me turn to another area of importance. Our  
20 County Directors of Veterans Affairs and the DMVA Bureau of  
21 Veterans Affairs service officers could be an important  
22 asset in helping both our older veterans and our returning  
23 War on Terrorism veterans. But because of a lack of  
24 guidance, a lack of performance expectations and standards,  
25 a lack of supervision, they are part of the systemic

1 failure.

2           For instance, just ask one of them, any one of  
3 them, how many non-National Guard War on Terrorism veterans  
4 there are in their area. According to VA data, 62,500  
5 Global War on Terrorism veterans reside in Pennsylvania,  
6 and only about 10 thousand of which are National Guard.  
7 They just don't know where they are, and they have no plan  
8 at the state or county level to find out.

9           This is a wicked problem, but it's a problem  
10 that has to be addressed as a part of outreach. The County  
11 Directors of Veterans Affairs by County Code administer the  
12 decoration of veterans' graves and assist war veterans and  
13 their families in obtaining their benefits for compensation  
14 and pensions, but little else, especially in the realm of  
15 federal benefits.

16           Some directors are part-time, some are not  
17 qualified and some counties don't even have directors  
18 appointed. Read the LB and FC report. Many of our  
19 counties have expanded their director's responsibilities,  
20 but the brutal facts are that the counties do whatever they  
21 like. DMVA trains the directors only if they choose to be  
22 trained.

23           They are not required by law to be accredited by  
24 the VA for processing claims. In truth, many of the county  
25 directors merely forward claims to one of the veterans'



1 service organizations for processing. Our veterans need a  
2 system where these local assets are coordinated or even  
3 managed by a focused state organization to ensure that the  
4 directors are well trained, that they benefit by  
5 centralized direction and that they get good management and  
6 that they are accountable.

7           Bad advice to a veteran is worse than no advice  
8 at all. A separate department is the right organization  
9 for such a job. So a very, very major question is where  
10 are the advocates for this powerful economic engine our  
11 veterans represent? Our veterans have been ingrained with  
12 ethics, the values, the disciplines, characteristics not  
13 commonly found in their peers.

14           These attributes represent exactly what we want  
15 to see in our community leaders, our business people, our  
16 entrepreneurs and other contributors to society. World War  
17 II, the Korean War, the Vietnam, all those veterans have  
18 proven that. Let's look at our youngest veterans. These  
19 veterans need to be groomed and supported. Their biggest  
20 concern when they are discharged is getting a job.

21           The federal government has wonderful programs  
22 for veterans in the areas of education, including tuition  
23 assistance; small business loans; federal contract  
24 set-asides; transportation assistance for handicapped;  
25 mental health services, especially for PTSD; vocational

1 rehabilitation; home loan guarantees; homelessness;  
2 re-employment rights and others.

3           Pennsylvania's Code does not require the County  
4 Directors of Veterans Affairs to be experts on federal  
5 programs, nor is it the responsibility of the DMVA's Bureau  
6 of Veterans Affairs. Some individuals might know of these  
7 programs, but they are complex to understand. Well, then  
8 who will do it because it's not being done effectively now?  
9 Who will interface Pennsylvania's veterans into this  
10 cornucopia of opportunities?

11           The answer is the most important thing I will  
12 say today. The failure of our system is too broad and too  
13 deep to correct with Band-Aids. A mind set of disjointed  
14 incrementalism has improved our system over the past three  
15 years, but it is too little, too late and too lacking of  
16 vision. We need to create a State Department of Veterans  
17 Affairs.

18           The secretary of that department can and will  
19 reach out to our veterans and get them into the programs  
20 that will realize their potential. We don't have that  
21 today. This is a critical component of a new department.  
22 It is, in fact, the priming of the economic pump that will  
23 benefit our Commonwealth for years to come. Claims and  
24 benefits and pensions are the fish of the parable.

25           They will feed, at least to some extent. But

1 these federal programs -- and by the way, there are state  
2 opportunities -- represent the fishing. Taking advantage  
3 of them will position Pennsylvania for the future. Our  
4 current view of what veterans affairs is all about is far  
5 too limited. In closing, the MOPH is enthusiastic about  
6 the creation of a State Department of Veterans Affairs. We  
7 have not wavered in our belief of such a separate  
8 department.

9           HB 344 is an excellent starting point for such a  
10 department, and in fact, it would give a cabinet-level  
11 secretary the authority necessary to configure and  
12 fine-tune a department to best serve the veterans  
13 throughout the state. And the secretary would be able to  
14 negotiate on an equal footing with both state and federal  
15 agencies to secure the rights and benefits our veterans  
16 deserve.

17           There are areas in this bill which can be  
18 strengthened, and that's your job to do. The issue of how  
19 to integrate those contract employees that work for the  
20 Governor's Veterans Outreach Assistance Center is an  
21 example. Here, federally-funded people who are not  
22 required to be accredited by the VA and therefore cannot  
23 process claims through GOVAC, a Department Secretary could  
24 work that issue with or without explicit direction in the  
25 legislation.

1           So please give this legislation the attention to  
2 detail that it deserves, make improvements where necessary  
3 and send it to the Senate. The well-being of our veteran  
4 community, especially the future veterans returning from  
5 the Global War on Terrorism, depends in large measure on  
6 your actions. Thank you very much.

7           CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Thank you, Mr. Jackson.

8           And just one thing. Mr. Navarre's testimony  
9 reminded me of an announcement I neglected to make, and  
10 that was that Representative Ed Pashinski from Luzerne  
11 County wanted to attend today, but he had commitments back  
12 home.

13           And I know Representative Pashinski is -- the  
14 Agent Orange thing reminded me of Representative Pashinski  
15 as well as the homeless veterans are issues that I know  
16 he's very interested in. And he had asked that all the  
17 testimony that is presented today would be forwarded to his  
18 office for review, so we will do that.

19           We will send all these testimonies, not only to  
20 Representative Pashinski, but to other members of the  
21 Committee. We're also being joined by Representative Neal  
22 Goodman. Neal is from Schuylkill County.

23           Mr. Hudzinski?

24           MR. HUDZINSKI: Good morning, Mr. Chairman, and  
25 members of the Committee. I am Richard Hudzinski, a

1 retired Army Corps Engineer Officer and Chairman of the  
2 Veterans Affairs Committee of the Lehigh Valley Military  
3 Affairs Council, a regional association which is concerned  
4 for the well-being of our veterans, service members and  
5 their families. General Sajer has entered a series of  
6 exhibits which has an exhibit list to many of the documents  
7 that we have referred.

8           It includes all the studies that have been  
9 performed on this state. There's been two done by the  
10 state itself, one done by LVMAC, and the Auditor General  
11 did a round as well and his Breakfast reports, plus we have  
12 other testimonies. What I will be referring to, you should  
13 have in your hand a chart series like this to look at your  
14 leisure.

15           You will also see something that has been  
16 mentioned by others, states that have separate Departments  
17 of Veterans Affairs. There's 29 of them. That lists them  
18 in order of their size and by type of organization. And  
19 then the details of my remarks will be bound in what is  
20 called a Bill and Fiscal Analysis. I went in and explained  
21 HB 344.

22           Remember that when this bill was created -- and  
23 this was back in the previous legislative session -- there  
24 was no Act 66. It talks about how you would incorporate  
25 that in there. It talks about some of the weaknesses in

1 the bill that needs some improvement. And then it goes  
2 into a fiscal analysis of which I will talk.

3 As a result of concern over the claims system  
4 brought to us by our local veterans, my organization  
5 conducted a formal study, as I mentioned, and reported its  
6 findings to the Pennsylvania War Veterans Council in  
7 September 2004, a joint session of the House and Senate  
8 Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committees in  
9 November 2004, and the Adjutant General in February 2004  
10 after previously briefing her prior Deputy Adjutant General  
11 several months prior, before that.

12 This hearing on the State Department of Veterans  
13 Affairs bill has been a long time coming, and it's been too  
14 long when one considers we are at war and need to provide  
15 the best possible support to our estimated 54 thousand  
16 veterans separated since 9/11, plus those veterans in  
17 inactive status of Select Reserve and Guard.

18 Those preceding me have discussed why a State  
19 Department of Veterans Affairs with a cabinet-level  
20 secretary is so vitally important to the veterans of this  
21 Commonwealth and also the military. For my part, I shall  
22 discuss the cost of a separate department, make some  
23 comments on its structure and purposes, and finally provide  
24 some additional insights into why all this is necessary.

25 The short version of this is costwise. When you

1 start looking at what has happened in the past 20 years,  
2 you have, in constant dollars, a budget that is  
3 three-and-a-half times what it was when it first started  
4 for veterans' affairs. Right now, your general funds that  
5 you provide to the Department of Military and Veterans  
6 Affairs, of that, 78 percent goes to veterans' affairs.

7           In addition, what you're seeing is an increase  
8 in organization occurring, and lately, in Pennsylvania  
9 terms, an explosion. The organization has already, with  
10 the 2008-2009 budget, if approved, it will be nearly triple  
11 what it was, what was reported at the time of the study by  
12 Defense Solutions.

13           The overall structure since 2003 has increased  
14 about 9 percent, so you're looking at 2085. By any  
15 account, this is a time to review an organization, to sit  
16 back and take a look and see are we on the right track,  
17 where do we need to fix. It seems to me that we are at  
18 that point. The report calculated, the one done by Defense  
19 Solutions, just over 8 million for staff and equipping the  
20 headquarters properly if it did not own facilities, which  
21 is probably the way we would go.

22           At that time, that would have been about \$6.6  
23 million more than the current, than the operation reported.  
24 LVMAC has gone through the Right-to-Know Act and  
25 interviewed other people and has done its own assessment

1 and updated that data, which is provided in the fiscal  
2 analysis, and right now, if you were to implement the total  
3 cost of the structure that we are talking about  
4 today -- we're not talking about the state homes.

5           We're not talking about the Scotland School for  
6 Children. We're talking about the headquarters and that  
7 category of service officers. That would come in at  
8 8-and-a-quarter million. Okay? However, in light of the  
9 2008-2009 budget proposal, the actual increase necessary  
10 would be less than 3.4 million.

11           That would represent a 3 percent increase in the  
12 general funds being proposed. It would raise them to about  
13 107.6 million. That estimate is conservative, and it  
14 includes salaries, benefits, operating cost to include  
15 leasings and rentals. And we have interviewed DGS.  
16 Several years ago, the Bureau had claimed it would cost \$17  
17 million additional to create a department.

18           What has been proposed will now cost a fifth of  
19 that at the current rate of expansion. Regardless, its  
20 creation would pay for itself with increased state  
21 revenues, and they would be substantial. As to the  
22 structure, what would it look like, no one can honestly  
23 give you a full answer to that because the concept of this  
24 bill is to get the secretary, and other than specifying  
25 that he have a Veterans Benefit Assistance Bureau and a



1 bureau to handle state homes and the Scotland School, they  
2 are more naturally aligned.

3           There's many common functions. Okay? The  
4 Secretary would actually determine the rest of the form of  
5 the organization and the staffing, phasing it in using a  
6 combination of existing resources, new direct hires,  
7 interagency agreements, contracts to accomplish its new and  
8 old missions. However, you are always asking questions  
9 about cost.

10           This would normally be done in the appropriation  
11 process. The reason we're talking about it, we shouldn't,  
12 as veterans have to, is because it's always being thrown up  
13 against us for not having this, something that we believe  
14 is a moral obligation in the first place. Take care of our  
15 veterans, those who go to war for us. Well, you have to do  
16 modeling to figure out costs.

17           So both Defense Solutions did theirs and we did  
18 ours. And they come out pretty similar in cost and total  
19 people. And I actually went through and redid my modeling  
20 to allow for Act 66. And in doing so, essentially what I  
21 can tell you is that the first major increase would be in  
22 the number of state service officers.

23           And it is important to note that the bill  
24 proposes fielding accredited state service officers to  
25 where they are needed, not just in the VA regional offices

1 in Philadelphia, and giving the Department some control  
2 over the county service officers when performing claims  
3 work and outreach tasks.

4           As far back as 1991, the Legislative Budget and  
5 Finance Committee report on the same subject -- this has  
6 been going on a long time -- said this: Creation of an  
7 independent administrative department or commission in  
8 Pennsylvania without a major change in the state's reliance  
9 on independent county departments of veterans affairs may  
10 serve to improve the visibility of the state's veterans'  
11 programs, but is not likely to directly address concerns  
12 over outreach and coordination of services.

13           Over 25 years later, this statement is still  
14 true. You just heard it today, and the same thinking is  
15 expressed in the more recent report conducted in 2007. The  
16 number of service officers would probably increase to a  
17 total on the order of 20 and 30 after considering Act 66.

18           However, if county veterans' service officers  
19 are not brought under the state's operational umbrella by  
20 law as expressed in House Bill 344, as is done in some  
21 other states, more would be required. For its part, the  
22 Bureau has recently added nine -- now I hear another -- to  
23 the previous three. It's now at 13.

24           Therefore, the impact of a new department of  
25 service officers is substantially lessened. The second

1 major increase would be in the necessary support staff for  
2 an independent department. Unlike previously reported, the  
3 Bureau does -- that is the Veterans Affairs Bureau -- does  
4 finance a considerable part of its support services. It  
5 does this by providing the funding from its veterans' home  
6 budget for the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs  
7 to hire personnel at Indiantown Gap, to provide purchasing  
8 budget, human resource, legal support, etcetera.

9           There has been no free ride. What they've  
10 garnered is engineering support and some other ancillary  
11 services. And, no, they haven't paid for all of it, but it  
12 has not been a free ride. Additional increase in personnel  
13 would be needed and wanted. The increase would not be as  
14 substantial as first thought. Yet those increases would go  
15 a long way to improving the Department's capability to  
16 plan, develop, manage and assess programs.

17           Veterans' affairs -- and it's been pointed out,  
18 but I want to make the point -- is much more than the  
19 claims, state homes and children's schools; and, after  
20 discounting war bonuses, a few state aid programs which  
21 affect fewer than 47 thousand people in 2007 in a state  
22 with well over 1 million veterans.

23           Veterans' affairs in other states address such  
24 issues as substance abuse, mental health -- and I can tell  
25 you the states if you want to address it

1 later -- homelessness, home loans, transportation,  
2 employment, training assistance, re-entry bonuses when  
3 needed, not 15 to 20 years late, fiduciary services, grant  
4 writing and recommending bona fide and timely veterans'  
5 legislation of importance.

6           You will note that -- and it even occurred today  
7 in the discussion -- that we often confuse service member  
8 legislation with veterans' affairs legislation. They are  
9 not quite the same thing. And I look back to the year  
10 2000. Of the consequential acts that have been passed,  
11 there were five that affected veterans. There were -- and  
12 it's in your chart -- 30 to 35 servicemen's acts of which  
13 one, by the redefinition of a service member, probably  
14 helped veterans.

15           Okay? And then there were about 30, 35 fishing  
16 license, bridge naming, road naming bills for veterans, but  
17 five consequential acts. Act 66 was probably the most  
18 significant of the bunch because it did the most for the  
19 most veterans. To sum up, the anticipated overall increase  
20 is expected to be on the order of 30 to 40 positions.

21           Consequently, the work force for the  
22 headquarters and service officer cadre would be between 85  
23 and 92 personnel. The Scotland School and state veterans'  
24 homes are not affected by this change except where more  
25 consolidation of common functions might occur. The sooner

1 we act, however, the better, for it will mean less turmoil  
2 in potential changes of positions. But why do all this?  
3 Why go the extra mile?

4 I've already implied there is more to veterans  
5 affairs than we traditionally have done. There are other  
6 reasons also. Per capita statistics, data normalization  
7 are frequently used by professionals in the VA and other  
8 organizations for better comparisons between states to  
9 include the National Association of State Directors of  
10 Veterans Affairs.

11 For total U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
12 expenditures per capita spent on this Commonwealth in  
13 fiscal year 2007 -- that's the latest data -- we rung in at  
14 number 42. We rang in 43rd for all the veterans' benefits  
15 received. Even those who insist on total dollar amounts  
16 should have cause for concern.

17 While we are fifth in population, we have  
18 dropped to seventh in compensation and pension in the last  
19 few years in total dollars, and we are tenth in total  
20 dollars in education and vocational rehabilitation. We are  
21 also being propped up by hospital construction dollars  
22 flowing into the state. There's a major rebuilding and  
23 renovation effort going in the state, as you know, in  
24 Pittsburgh, and has happened in Wilkes-Barre and all  
25 around.

1           Okay? This is not something to depend upon year  
2 after year. Other states don't. Let's spend a moment on  
3 compensation and pension activity because despite it being  
4 only one aspect of veterans' affairs, as I have said -- and  
5 I'm sorry for repeating this -- there are among us those  
6 who believe it is the ultimate reason for a veterans'  
7 affairs organization at state level.

8           In fact, the first need of the vast majority of  
9 young veterans is good paying jobs. For others, it's  
10 education which will lead to jobs, and a home is certainly  
11 up there in the priorities, if one is married, for the  
12 stability of the family. They want what everyone else  
13 wants, the American dream. Stop treating them like they're  
14 on some welfare system.

15           Let's spend -- trend lines show that  
16 Pennsylvania has not significantly risen in the number of  
17 compensation and disability pension cases over the past  
18 five years despite the VA processing more claims than it  
19 has ever done in its history. We are, in effect, static,  
20 while we should be expecting to see veterans seeking  
21 compensation and pension at an increased rate because of  
22 war and aging populations creating the demand.

23           We appear to be missing the boat. But why  
24 shouldn't we be? Our Bureau County Director system is more  
25 an ad hoc arrangement than a driven machine. It is not a

1 significant influencer of success. Bureau County  
2 performance over just the last two years has increased, but  
3 it should not be exaggerated either.

4           There is a lot to be made up for. New York's  
5 state service officers haul in over two to three times as  
6 much dollars per year with less accredited service  
7 officers. In its entire history, our Bureau County system  
8 has accounted for only about 6 percent of the compensation  
9 and pension cases and total award dollars in this state.

10           The VFW with far, far fewer service officers has  
11 performed at the same level overall. Clearly, the system,  
12 for all its concentration on claims, must be ineffective  
13 and inefficient. Clearly, the state has not realized its  
14 responsibility as the retailer of this type of benefit to  
15 our veterans as a go-between for the federal government as  
16 is done by other states.

17           Something new needs to be tried. The VA will be  
18 expecting more and more of veterans' service officers in  
19 the future, not less. In fact, they are consolidating.  
20 They have consolidated it to pension centers. It's done  
21 essentially in three locations; two education centers, two  
22 insurance centers -- and they would have gone to ten  
23 compensation and pension centers if it were not for this  
24 war, and it would look politically untenable.

25           They are becoming processing centers, and they

1 may have small field offices. More and more, the burden is  
2 being placed on the state to be the intermediary. And the  
3 system has become much more complex and litigious than it  
4 was in the early 1970's. Yet we seem stuck in the '70's  
5 mentality on what veterans require while the need and  
6 demand for service of those veterans has changed.

7           If the first Persian Gulf War in 1991 portends  
8 what is to come, we are in deep trouble. Initially, there  
9 were 383 deaths and 487 injuries from that war. By May  
10 2002, the VA had recognized 262,586 disabled by the war and  
11 another 10,617 died of combat-related injuries or illnesses  
12 since, a phenomenal 30.8 percent casualty rate.

13           We have lost over 4 thousand killed in the  
14 current wars, suffered thousands of casualties and scores  
15 upon scores of extremely serious injuries. What will the  
16 VA see in the way of a casualty rate for this group in 17  
17 years? Our current system just is not equipped to handle  
18 the onslaught.

19           Furthermore, we sorely need a system with the  
20 authority and capability to integrate the efforts of  
21 others, like county directors, Department of Labor and  
22 Industry Governor Outreach and Assistance Center contract  
23 employees, veterans' service organizations under grant  
24 contract, DLI veterans' employment representatives and  
25 Department of Education veterans' education advisors.



1 All should be involved and working together,  
2 referring work to each other with a customer service  
3 mentality. Every study entered as an exhibit, including  
4 the Auditor General's, has touched upon this to some  
5 extent. We should stop making excuses for our failures.  
6 It is getting us nowhere. Good people -- and there are  
7 good people working in the system in the Bureau today.  
8 Okay? Good people can only go so far with this system.

9 We are not in a situation where we are number  
10 eight state in new claims, as it has sometimes been  
11 reported, implying all we need to do is refine the current  
12 operation. That is a 2005 statistic in the first place,  
13 and it expresses the dollars received per compensation  
14 recipient.

15 That goes more to the seriousness of the  
16 injuries of those we are helping than to the number of  
17 veterans being helped, who is being helped and how well  
18 they are being helped. New York is a good state for  
19 comparison for many reasons to include, and its veterans  
20 population is almost the same as ours.

21 In 2007, it remains in fourth position on total  
22 expenditures, exceeding \$3.5 billion, or 750 more than we  
23 received, 750 million more than we received. It did this  
24 despite its substantial problem of veterans departing the  
25 state after successfully being awarded a claim, and its

1 lower number of military retirees has been used as an  
2 excuse and also its lower number of Vietnam veterans by  
3 comparison.

4           Its outreach has been more successful over time,  
5 and it has been more involved with the transitioning of all  
6 veterans returning from the war. Annually, it handles over  
7 35 percent of the veterans' claims cases, meaning 70  
8 percent of all veterans' service officer work in the state,  
9 not 6 percent.

10           Quite simply, a greater dynamic is involved  
11 here, a state government organization that has a governor's  
12 ear and attention; equal status with other secretaries  
13 whose departments provide services to veterans; more direct  
14 involvement with the highest level of the VA; more  
15 resources at its disposal; more ability to control those  
16 resources and place them where needed; more performance  
17 management and accountability.

18           And it seems to be getting beyond that narrow  
19 thinking that views claims work as the objective rather  
20 than as part of a continuum of services reinforcing one  
21 another to bring the veteran finally home. Ultimately, for  
22 some there will never be enough statistics to justify  
23 change and the metrics will fall short.

24           The top-notch Institute of Defense Analysis,  
25 when asked to study why one state performs better than

1 another in disability compensation, commented upon the  
2 problem with the accuracy and completeness of VA data  
3 necessary to good evaluation. The result was an incomplete  
4 study where it had to question some of its own findings.  
5 As example, the statistical result showed that service  
6 officers had an adverse effect on compensation dollars and  
7 on the percentage of veterans receiving compensation.

8           However, this is not an excuse to do nothing.  
9 It did not stop Act 66. It should not stop the move  
10 towards a separate state department of veterans affairs.  
11 In the end, this is about common sense, your gut thinking,  
12 your willingness to try something new, your moral compass.  
13 Other state legislatures have shown us the way.

14           Most recently, Ohio become the 29th state to  
15 enact legislation for a separate department of veterans  
16 affairs. Veterans' organizations, officials, legislators  
17 and the Adjutant General in that state all agreed this was  
18 in the best interests of its returning veterans and those  
19 who have not been well served in the past. Why should we  
20 be any different?

21           We should want to be like a New York, not a New  
22 Jersey; like a Florida, not a Michigan; and now, like an  
23 Ohio. To conclude, the times have changed. The cost of  
24 creating a new department is modest considering the cost  
25 benefit. The department envisioned in House Bill 344 will

1 give us the capability to provide a wider array of  
2 necessary veterans' affairs missions.

3           The surface data provides no excuse not to move  
4 on to more advanced ways of assisting our veterans and  
5 doing business, especially knowing the consequences we are  
6 facing from this war. We need a new vision of what  
7 veterans' affairs is about and the tool to accomplish it.  
8 Government is responsible for its veterans.

9           It sent them to fight. A moral debt is owed.  
10 To honor this obligation, we must rededicate ourselves to  
11 the primary purposes of a veterans' affairs system, to  
12 reintegrate returning veterans into the society as  
13 productive citizens, to care for the widows and orphans of  
14 the fallen and to minister to those broken in body and mind  
15 by the hardships of war and in need of our aid.

16           Whether veteran or not, we as citizens are  
17 responsible for assuring those purposes are accomplished in  
18 the most effective and efficient manner. We have depended  
19 far too long on a BVA County system that has serious flaws  
20 in it and has limited capabilities. It is not up to the  
21 modern requirements.

22           While Act 66 may prove its worth as a tool to  
23 assist veterans' service organizations in performing claims  
24 services, it is a patch nonetheless, and more importantly  
25 there is more to do and to deliver than veterans' service

1 officers can provide. Do not doubt that. Again, House  
2 Bill 344 provides the foundation to creating that better  
3 way.

4 We ask that you become proactive for a state  
5 department of veterans affairs with a cabinet-level  
6 secretary. Do not be deterred by the naysayers. This is  
7 good for all; the veteran, his or her family, the military,  
8 the veterans' service organizations, the Commonwealth, the  
9 taxpayer, and above all, our society.

10 Thank you, Mr. Chairman, I would be pleased to  
11 answer any questions you have at this time.

12 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Thank you.

13 MR. HUDZINSKI: Can I answer one question though  
14 that has been raised? Representative Solobay brought up  
15 the issue, well, are we adding a level of bureaucracy.  
16 Well, think about it. You're elevating an organization  
17 that is a bureau or now an office within the Department of  
18 Military and Veterans Affairs, and now you're putting it up  
19 beside the Governor's ear.

20 That is not a layer. That's direct connection,  
21 and that's the first thing that you need. And the cost of  
22 that bureaucracy is minuscule in comparison to the results  
23 that you'll get back. The estimate was \$5 hundred million  
24 just to reach the national average. The economic reuse is  
25 1.3 billion. This is the old statistic. The revenue for

1 from that is 6 percent, and they'll be 6 percent several  
2 times, by the way, but just 6 percent in one time would be  
3 30 million.

4           And what are we asking for, 3.4 million more  
5 than what you're already going to probably increase. And  
6 even if it was another 8 million, that's chump change. In  
7 fact, out of our slush fund -- excuse me for the  
8 language -- you have enough to fund this for the next 20 to  
9 30 years.

10           CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Thank you. I don't know that  
11 we have a slush fund.

12           MR. HUDZINSKI: Excuse me.

13           CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: But I think we do have maybe  
14 a Rainy Day Fund.

15           MR. HUDZINSKI: Your legislative fund. Sorry.

16           REPRESENTATIVE BEYER: We're not in charge of  
17 that.

18           CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Representative Zeller?

19           MR. ZELLER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

20           To reiterate a little bit what Rich was talking  
21 about and also General Sajer and we'll get a little bit on  
22 to our very respectful Adjutant General, sometimes we fail  
23 to realize how fragile the advancement of our great nation  
24 has been and how easy it would be to lose what so many  
25 people have died and suffered for.

1           I'd like to remind you, two thousand years ago  
2 when the Israelites escaped the bounds of Egypt, what  
3 happened? They were being pursued by the Egyptian Army,  
4 and they came to the Sea of Reeds. They escaped through  
5 the Sea of Reeds only because they were very fearful of  
6 entering because of snakes and other items of danger, but  
7 they had a leader. And the leader led, and they followed.

8           And they went into the desert, were there for,  
9 what, hundreds of years. They survived. But the point  
10 I'm getting at is, I would never want to find a period in  
11 our history when we're afraid to lead in if the cause is  
12 right, and that is why this cause that we're talking about  
13 today is so right because -- and I want to get back to  
14 something that my wonderful young lady said here who  
15 represents our area, Ms. Beyer.

16           I admire her work and also Representative  
17 Grucela. He's up there in our good old Northampton County,  
18 and he does a tremendous job. And I say that respectfully.  
19 And this is the first time I ever met this young gentleman  
20 to sponsor the bill, Mr. Siptroth. I know what this young  
21 lady does, and I know what Representative Grucela does, and  
22 what she said in regard to the lineup of people coming into  
23 her office needing help.

24           And with all respect for your veterans that are  
25 out there, I'm going to tell you a little story about that.

1 They try, but they need, as Rich mentioned a little bit  
2 ago, they need that combination from the federal down to  
3 the state level and into their hands to be able to do a  
4 job. Now, I'm going to talk a little bit about my  
5 background, and there's a reason for it because I was not  
6 liked too well in Harrisburg. I was, understand, I was the  
7 only legislator in the history of Pennsylvania that got the  
8 holy hell beat out of him on the floor of the House.

9           As a matter of fact, two gentlemen got on my  
10 frame because I exposed them in regard to an action that  
11 they claim that was being taken on them. And they were  
12 lying because being a member of the Pennsylvania Crime  
13 Commission, we investigated it, and we found out that they  
14 were telling a big fat lie. So they pummeled me pretty  
15 bad.

16           Now, getting on the local level, all of you here  
17 who served in the House of Representatives, which I served  
18 on your committee many years ago, you know what it's like  
19 in the local community. You are very concerned, or you  
20 wouldn't be sitting there because your public back home  
21 elected you because they trust you and you're here to do a  
22 job for them.

23           And in doing so, it's not easy, to speak out  
24 down here representing your area, especially when the  
25 leadership wants certain bills and you don't go along with



1 it, you're not very well liked. And I never had an office  
2 in my district. I was never allowed to have a -- there's a  
3 few of us like that. And I never had a secretary. I had  
4 to depend upon what I had down here. So it wasn't very  
5 easy.

6           However, I was appointed to the Crime Commission  
7 by the, in other words, Governor Shafer, Ray Shafer, who  
8 just died recently; and the senator from Lehigh County,  
9 Senator VanSant (ph). You all probably remember him, quite  
10 a senator, Republican Senator. And he said to the Governor  
11 that my background in the Borough of Emmaus and the county  
12 in regard to 71 cases I had that either went to court or  
13 against the Borough or Commission, I was successful on all  
14 of them but one.

15           And that was a minor case that we didn't do our  
16 homework, so we learned to do our homework. So I wanted to  
17 bring that to your attention, and you can read about it.  
18 And I'm going to leave that bologna out. But what I want  
19 to bring to your attention is something very necessary in  
20 serving the public that places one in this position of  
21 representing them, and that is credibility in taking a  
22 stand where the pressure becomes almost unbearable from  
23 opposition even though the cause is right.

24           I'd like to add that during my legislative  
25 tenure, the leaders of both the Pennsylvania House and

1 Senate held Joe Zeller in contempt because I was asked to  
2 serve on the Crime Commission as well as seek status as a  
3 legislator by then Governor Ray Shafer to investigate any  
4 elected official in Harrisburg who were in violation of  
5 state or federal law.

6           With our investigation and going to court and  
7 thanks to the Rico Act under the federal government and the  
8 FBI working with us, we sent six state legislators and two  
9 department secretaries went to Allenwood Prison, including  
10 the Speaker of the House and the Senate, four committee  
11 chairs and two department secretaries, all prosecuted under  
12 the Rico Act, applicable because each case involved two or  
13 more violations.

14           So you can understand that I was not a very  
15 favorite legislator. Okay. Now you ask what this is all  
16 about on the subject of today's hearing. The answer's that  
17 we are all involved in an issue which has been pushed under  
18 the table on all levels of government far too long, that  
19 being the case of our veterans and their families.

20           Now, back home, we have a problem, and  
21 Representative Beyer runs into it, so does Representative  
22 Grucela and all of you. You got moms and dads and wives  
23 and grandparents, all have sons and daughters, cousins,  
24 nephews serving in the service. They come home, and if  
25 they don't get taken care of, who's going to go out and

1 raise a little hell? I got news for you.

2           When you go and stack up and get involved in  
3 even the Animal Act, like dogs or any issue pertaining to  
4 animals -- because, man, you better pull your horns in  
5 because you're going to have all these people on your frame  
6 real quick. And that's going to happen here. Unless we do  
7 something about it, we're going to hear from the women, and  
8 God bless you.

9           They're not going to be easy on you. We need  
10 help. Now, some of you may be veterans and receive  
11 publications from the VFW, American Legion, AMVETS. I have  
12 them all here. I brought a whole gang along. I live with  
13 them. As a service officer back home and everything, these  
14 are all -- American Legion, VFW, AMVETS, you name it.

15           We have them, and every one of them have a  
16 publication in here they're not getting taken care of, and  
17 you know it. Now, after having served in Lehigh Valley in  
18 veterans' affairs as a service officer, a post adjutant and  
19 an elected official of over 50 years, I was asked by the  
20 County Executive to serve on their in-house committee which  
21 interviews and selects the best three candidates to fill  
22 the position of County Veterans Director.

23           The County Executive selects one individual from  
24 these three with the other two for future consideration  
25 should the nominee is unable to serve if something happens.

1 Of course, politics being politics, the Executive and Board  
2 of Commissioners are always striving to serve their  
3 electorate and nothing can be more devastating than  
4 veterans or their families exposing apparent lack of  
5 concern.

6           Excuse me. I've got laryngitis. I might  
7 survive. I've been dealing with this ever since I came out  
8 of the service, and I'm on prednisone. And I understand  
9 what my good buddy on the end is going through because I've  
10 been living with it. I can justify the fact that most  
11 County Veterans Directors are sincere and do all they can  
12 to assist our veterans, working with the federally-run  
13 hospitals and agencies and so forth.

14           However, these directors couldn't do it all and  
15 often become entangled in the bureaucratic web of  
16 intermingling agencies as well as diminishing staff levels  
17 due to shrinking budgets on the municipal level. General  
18 Sajer brought out this alarming reality when he noted, in  
19 these days, the Adjutant General has enough to do in  
20 helping their Guard be ready for active service on many  
21 fronts, disasters here in America, terrorist threats on our  
22 soil as well as maneuvers on the state and federal level  
23 with our military.

24           Last year, I went to -- thank you. Thank you  
25 very much, Doctor, Dr. Rich. Last year, I was invited to

1 speak in Arizona to a group of, with a military program to  
2 a group of Indians who were, what you call up in the front  
3 lines, and they were awarded for their -- what do you call  
4 it -- their language that nobody could understand. The  
5 Japs and Germans couldn't understand them. You probably  
6 know about that, Navajos. I spoke to them. And also by  
7 the Chief -- they call him Chairman now -- were taken down  
8 to the border to see what's happening down there.

9 I'm making a point here, and this is very  
10 important to know how the government functions. I met with  
11 the first sergeant there in regard to what's going on on  
12 the illegal immigration thing. He said, nothing. I said,  
13 what do you mean. He said, well, we're on vacation; you  
14 see all those trailers out there; that's where we live,  
15 play cards. He said, we have fun, play ball and stuff.

16 I said, well, what's going on; what do you  
17 actually do. He says, well, when these guys come in with  
18 automobiles and vans and trucks and they haul illegals in  
19 and they go across the border and they run over a fence  
20 where the Indians have the natives and the cattle get out  
21 and the horses get out and then they complain, so we have  
22 to go and find those trucks and vans.

23 He said, see over there, that big section. He  
24 says, that is loaded with cars and trucks and everything  
25 that we can't even get rid of. We pick them, and we turn

1 the guys over to authorities. He says, we're not allowed  
2 to do anything because they want the cheap labor brought in  
3 here, illegals.

4 Now, so I got this boy I adopted in China,  
5 and -- semi-adopted him. He's up in Canada now, in  
6 Calgary, and I wanted to have him come down here and visit  
7 me. He can't come across the border, not because of  
8 Canadian law, but because of United States Government Law.

9 They will not allow him to come over here until  
10 he gets a visa, and it takes four years to get a visa.  
11 Now, the point I'm getting at, if you think that the  
12 veterans' affairs in Washington and the state and our local  
13 director's going to do a job for you, it's such a hell of a  
14 mess. They can't even control the border and won't allow  
15 somebody to come in from Canada, but these illegals can  
16 come across any time they want.

17 So I'm just making this as a point. The  
18 problems you're going to have unless we do something -- I'm  
19 talking about with veterans -- unless we do something for  
20 the guys and gals that are putting their life on the line  
21 to protect us and our nation.

22 So that's the point I'm getting at, and it's all  
23 about what they tell you. And with all respect to General  
24 Sajer and also General Wright, on the federal and state  
25 level, it's a good tasting frosting on our rotten tasting

1 cake. That's what it's all about. I hate to tell you  
2 that, but that's the way I look at.

3           So now, I got a letter here. Sorry. Dear  
4 Chairman Melio, I am writing -- I got to get this right  
5 because the gentleman couldn't come here. Oh, yeah, George  
6 Bashere (ph). Right. Dear Chairman Melio, I write to you  
7 and your Honorable Committee to request your consideration  
8 for creating a Pennsylvania Department of Veterans Affairs  
9 separate and distinct from the Department of Military and  
10 Veterans Affairs.

11           I've had the honor of serving the New York State  
12 Division of Veterans Affairs from 1997 until November of  
13 last year, including ten years as director of that level  
14 department. I also served as President of the National  
15 Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs for  
16 2006-2007, giving me considerable insight into the  
17 effectiveness of state veterans' efforts.

18           Foremost, the missions of the Military  
19 Department and Veterans Affairs Department are very  
20 different. The Adjutant General's primary responsibility  
21 is the readiness of the state's National Guard Forces and  
22 the accomplishment of missions assigned to those units. In  
23 today's War on Terrorism environment, this means frequent  
24 deployments alongside the active military in addition to  
25 the state role normally filled by the Guard.

1           The state of readiness is the new normal and  
2 requires increased attention by the Adjutant General.  
3 Likewise, veterans' affairs resources requires increased  
4 attention to the new environment. This is the first  
5 extended conflict with an all-volunteer force resulting in  
6 repeated deployments for troops, and those troops are very  
7 different from those of us who served in Vietnam and their  
8 families have significantly different needs as veterans,  
9 which requires a state Department of Veterans Affairs to  
10 invest the time to link these troops and their families to  
11 federal and state benefits as they are discharged.

12           In New York, my agency spent a significant  
13 amount of time and effort working with state and local  
14 government agencies on their behalf; including labor,  
15 housing, health, mental health, alcohol and substance  
16 abuse, welfare, aging, civil service, education and others.

17           Careful alignment of resources and programs can  
18 make all the difference between a successful transition and  
19 missed opportunities. Linking veterans and their  
20 dependents to benefits is the key activity for a state  
21 Department of Veterans Affairs. Troops returning home from  
22 Iraq and Afghanistan have seen more combat and have been  
23 exposed to more disabling conditions than any other force  
24 in U.S. history.

25           The compensation and pension process used by the



1 federal government and Department of Veterans Affairs is  
2 arcane, complicated and flocked with chances for failure if  
3 a veteran attempts to negotiate it on his or her terms.  
4 Well-trained counselors working in a consolidated system  
5 can make all the difference in securing the most favorable  
6 outcome for veterans applying for compensation in a timely  
7 manner.

8           It isn't enough to have veterans assisted by  
9 staff at the local level. That system has been trained and  
10 accredited to file claims. An effective statewide system  
11 measures quality, quantity and results on a regular basis.  
12 Such a system pays for itself in the amount of federal  
13 dollars realized by these efforts, not to mention the cost  
14 of avoidance of other state services not provided.

15           A statewide system can allocate resources where  
16 they are needed. Access to benefits shouldn't be an  
17 accident of geography. In other words, where veteran  
18 service organizations can play a significant role in  
19 outreach and assisting with veterans, it is important to  
20 remember these are nonprofit corporations who are  
21 accountable to their membership, not the taxpayers. And  
22 that is so true.

23           Finally, a state department of veterans affairs  
24 at a cabinet level can deal more effectively with the  
25 Federal VA while Adjutant Generals spend time building

1 relationships with the National Guard Bureau and the  
2 Department of Defense. Secretaries of veterans' affairs  
3 spent just as much time building -- in other words,  
4 relationships with the VA Secretary, Department Secretary,  
5 and the other secretaries for health benefits and memorial  
6 affairs. This is something they do. We realize that.

7           The VA is second only to the DOD in size and  
8 budget requiring a significant investment in time and  
9 relationship building to successfully become a recognized  
10 partner with the Organization. There are 15 VA Advisory  
11 Committees -- unbelievable -- covering a myriad of  
12 veteran-related issues.

13           Participation at this level is almost mandatory  
14 for an effective state department. True. A stand-alone  
15 department of veterans affairs will serve as a more  
16 effective agency when dealing with veterans' issues by  
17 virtue of its singular focus. This resources required for  
18 this change are minimal compared to the benefits derived by  
19 veterans and their families.

20           An effective department of veterans affairs will  
21 serve as a partner with a military department helping  
22 prepare troops and families for deployment and connecting  
23 them to benefits upon their return. This is a significant  
24 component in maintaining morale and intention of Guard  
25 personnel.

1           Mr. Chairman, and the members of this wonderful  
2 Committee, you have an opportunity to better meet the needs  
3 of Pennsylvania's 1 million veterans and their families. I  
4 urge you to take advantage of this opportunity and create a  
5 department of veterans affairs. On behalf of those 1  
6 million veterans, I want to thank you for the opportunity  
7 to present my views on the important subject, and I will be  
8 happy to answer any questions I can for you. You have the  
9 thing before you.

10           CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Thank you, Representative  
11 Zeller.

12           MR. ZELLER: Sorry about my voice, but I need a  
13 gin and tonic.

14           CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Representative, you don't  
15 need to be sorry about anything. Okay? And we all need a  
16 gin and tonic maybe.

17           Representative Beyer has some questions.

18           REPRESENTATIVE BEYER: Representative Zellers,  
19 good to see you.

20           MR. ZELLER: My pleasure.

21           REPRESENTATIVE BEYER: And, Rich, I was  
22 particularly interested in your remarks because I think  
23 they hit the nail right on the head what the problem is,  
24 and what I think we witnessed is that our Adjutant General  
25 is in an active state of denial. And, you know, I feel

1 that this issue really can't be won unless we're willing to  
2 battle.

3           And I'll go toe-to-toe with her because I just  
4 find it somewhat -- I just find oftentimes, frankly -- I  
5 hate to say this -- oftentimes her testimony before this  
6 Committee and certainly today was somewhat disingenuous.

7           And it troubles me because I don't think her  
8 role -- I think that if the Adjutant General said to the  
9 Governor, we're doing as much as we can, but we could do so  
10 much more and these are the resources that I believe we  
11 need to serve our veterans the best way we possibly can and  
12 that may mean that the responsibilities for veterans is  
13 removed from this office, my office, but, in fact, separate  
14 into a different department, then this whole dialog would  
15 be very different.

16           And I cannot express to you my level of  
17 disappointment with her and her office. So having said  
18 that, can any of you tell me where you think the problem  
19 really lies, in that this has been under discussion since  
20 the beginning of 1991, according to testimony, right, Rich?

21           MR. HUDZINSKI: At least 1991. It's been a  
22 veterans' organization position for years and years.

23           REPRESENTATIVE BEYER: For years and years,  
24 but --

25           MR. HUDZINSKI: But it's been a veterans'

1 organization position on many of the veterans'  
2 organizations, and until recently, the Pennsylvania War  
3 Veterans Council for decades.

4 REPRESENTATIVE BEYER: Can you, any of you  
5 directly respond to this question because I need, I think  
6 we all really need to know. What has been the problem?  
7 Why hasn't this been embraced and carried out and done?  
8 Who and what are the real obstacles to getting this  
9 accomplished? Has it been the Legislature, or have we been  
10 part of the problem? That's what I'd like to know.

11 MR. GETZ: How many people care about the  
12 veterans? I mean, that's how I look at it. I don't see a  
13 lot of people caring about veterans. We do the work; we go  
14 to war; we come back. I don't understand -- I don't see  
15 the care for veterans. That's what I don't see.

16 REPRESENTATIVE BEYER: You think it's the lack  
17 of the passion on behalf of the residents of the  
18 Commonwealth that this hasn't been done?

19 MR. GETZ: I believe the residents -- you know,  
20 a lot of people don't serve. They don't understand things.  
21 They don't understand what we do and where we've been.

22 REPRESENTATIVE BEYER: Well, last year from some  
23 of the testimony, frankly, that we heard earlier or last  
24 year is that we have some folks that are in the military  
25 that don't understand the needs of veterans. And that's

1 very troubling. I mean, I -- and never a mention about the  
2 families and what services the departments are currently  
3 providing to the families of the troops that are overseas  
4 or the troops that are serving, no mention of families and  
5 what we're actively doing to help them. Having been a  
6 military spouse, I get that.

7                   But go ahead, Rich.

8                   MR. HUDZINSKI: Well, Representative, you're  
9 asking a very complex question, and I can give you several  
10 answers. Always remember also, the Adjutant General is an  
11 agent of the Executive Branch, and she has a difficult role  
12 to perform.

13                   But in the end, when you run into situations  
14 like this, this is why we've created this form of  
15 government. It's not the executive; it's not the judicial;  
16 it's the legislative that corrects things, according to the  
17 will of the people.

18                   I think if you ask the people, you would find  
19 out that this -- as an example, as one of the exhibits that  
20 was polled on by the House Democratic Caucus, when the poll  
21 was completed, it was 68 percent who were for a separate  
22 department of veterans' affairs. So in the end, you are  
23 the voice of the people, so if you want to look where the  
24 problem is, you have to look to yourselves right now.

25                   REPRESENTATIVE BEYER: You know, I agree with

1 that, but I'm going to have to tell you, I know there was  
2 some previous testimony where the Governor, this is one of  
3 his platform issues. And I'm not sure why or if the  
4 Governor has changed his mind, but it is my belief that if  
5 this Governor, as ambitious as he is -- and I'm not talking  
6 about ambitious for other things.

7 I'm talking about as ambitious as he is of  
8 policymaker and the attempt to get things done in the  
9 state. And oftentimes, I find myself agreeing with the  
10 Governor and like working in that bipartisan way. It is my  
11 belief if the Governor wraps his arms around this or gave  
12 the green light to this Representative who's worked really  
13 hard on this as prime sponsor of this legislation and said,  
14 it is time and we can do it and we can find the money in  
15 this budget to do it, it would be done.

16 Because Representative Goodman and I established  
17 the veterans' caucus in the House of Representatives. I  
18 think it is the single largest caucus, members, and the  
19 reason that we did that was so that we could really focus  
20 on veterans' issues in kind of a conversational let's bring  
21 the members together; let's talk about some issues.

22 So we've established that. So there's a great  
23 passion for veterans' issues within the Legislature.  
24 There's no question in my mind. I don't buy the argument  
25 that we don't want to spend \$10 million or whatever it is

1 to establish a department when we can give an \$85 million  
2 tax credit to the movie industry, etcetera, etcetera,  
3 etcetera, some of which I support. But I certainly do  
4 support this, and I don't see any reason why we can't spend  
5 the money. I don't buy the excuse that it's another layer  
6 of bureaucracy.

7 I don't buy that. That's not it. And I can't  
8 imagine that they're not willing to spend the money because  
9 we have it, so I don't buy that either. There's something  
10 else going on here, and all I can do is express to you -- I  
11 need to filibuster -- my unwavering commitment to get this  
12 done.

13 But I found in my time in Harrisburg, it is  
14 about passion and how much you're willing to put behind it  
15 and how much you're really kind of willing to put on the  
16 line and say, you know what, I want to get this done; I  
17 believe this needs to get done and working hard to make it  
18 happen. And I'm completely committed, as I know John  
19 knows, that I will do anything I can to help him get this  
20 accomplished.

21 I personally think it would be our greatest  
22 accomplishment. Nothing could top getting this done in my  
23 mind, no matter how many years I serve here. I would be so  
24 proud to get it done. So I have to run back to the Lehigh  
25 Valley, but I wanted to thank you all for being here.



1           And, Chairman Grucela, thank you.

2           John, thank you.

3           MR. ZELLER: Representative Beyer, what you  
4 brought out is so important. What could be better than  
5 another department, such as education -- hell, you name it;  
6 we've got so many of them -- that have the ear of the  
7 Governor or the Governor has their ear? What's more  
8 important than our veterans and their families to have the  
9 same ear? I mean, I can't believe it.

10           We depend upon them. They're our godsend. But  
11 we're lacking in having a department that they have,  
12 Representative, have the ear of the Governor. That's all  
13 we're asking for. That's all we're asking for, and you  
14 brought it out very well. What's wrong, and that's what's  
15 wrong. They don't have the ear.

16           REPRESENTATIVE BEYER: Well, what could it  
17 possibly hurt?

18           MR. ZELLER: Pardon?

19           REPRESENTATIVE BEYER: What could it possibly  
20 hurt?

21           MR. ZELLER: Right.

22           REPRESENTATIVE BEYER: All organizations would  
23 be represented. They would have a group of individuals  
24 dedicated solely to their issues and their mission. I  
25 don't understand it, and like I said, I consider this a

1 priority. This is a legislative priority. I may not be  
2 the prime sponsor of this bill. This is a legislative  
3 priority. I aim to help get this done, and I'm not going  
4 to take no for an answer, not from the Adjutant General or  
5 anyone else. Anyway, thank you very much.

6 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

7 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Thank you, Representative  
8 Beyer.

9 Representative Siptroth?

10 REPRESENTATIVE SIPTROTH: Just a comment. I  
11 think that prior to Act 66 -- we're not going to get into  
12 the debate, but while you're here, Representative Beyer,  
13 I'd like you to hear what I have to say -- that it was a  
14 more unified obligation to all veterans' organizations to  
15 move forward with the separation, and the bone was placed  
16 out there, first of all, with Senate Bill 915, the creation  
17 of Act 66, so that additional moneys would be forwarded to  
18 the Department of Veterans Affairs, Bureau of Veterans  
19 Affairs for the service officers.

20 And I think that we don't have the unity and  
21 strength, the numbers in strength today that we had prior  
22 to that act. So that's the part I wanted you to hear, and  
23 I hope that all of the veterans' organizations will come to  
24 realize that House Bill 344 is the way to move.

25 But getting back to particulars, Rich, you had

1 indicated in your testimony that the budget expenditures of  
2 the Department -- and just so I understood this -- the  
3 budget expenditures of the Department of Military and  
4 Veterans Affairs, 78 percent of those dollars are expended  
5 on?

6 MR. HUDZINSKI: In general funds, it's 78  
7 percent. The total that collides all augmentations,  
8 federal funds and things like that and special funds, it's  
9 28 to 29 percent of that entire DMVA budget. But the part  
10 you fund is 78 percent.

11 REPRESENTATIVE SIPTROTH: Okay. Thank you very  
12 much. I appreciate that.

13 Thank you, all. I would like to say thank you  
14 all for testifying.

15 Excuse me, Mr. Chairman, one other question.  
16 Representative Youngblood who had to leave asked -- someone  
17 had commented on ten diseases. If you could forward that  
18 list to me again. It wasn't in the part of your testimony  
19 as written.

20 MR. JACKSON: I'll get that to you.

21 REPRESENTATIVE SIPTROTH: If you can get that to  
22 me, I can get that to Representative Youngblood or if you  
23 forward it to Chairman Grucela, and he could. Thank you  
24 very much.

25 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Thank you, Representative

1 Siptroth.

2 I just have two very generic questions; one, I  
3 believe, Commander Getz, you mentioned -- and I'm asking  
4 this actually for Representative Pashinski because I know  
5 this is something he's discussed with me -- 25 percent of  
6 the veterans are homeless. Is that Pennsylvania or a  
7 nationwide statistic?

8 MR. GETZ: We picked that up -- I think that was  
9 a nationwide.

10 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: That's a nationwide  
11 statistic?

12 MR. GETZ: I'm not exactly sure what our numbers  
13 are. I don't know if anybody here can answer that.

14 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Yeah, does anyone have a  
15 homeless number for Pennsylvania veterans? And, again, I  
16 ask that almost in conjunction with Representative  
17 Pashinski because we have discussed this.

18 MR. HUDZINSKI: Yeah, the VA is underestimating.  
19 The statistics that they use can be found on the National  
20 Coalition for Homeless Veterans site, which is for the  
21 homeless shelter bed, but we know that they're  
22 undercounting.

23 We know there's increased activity in our area  
24 with the extension of Victory House when it increased in  
25 capacity. It filled, and as soon as they're out, they're

1 filling it back in. We also know how the surveys are done,  
2 and it requires partners to do the survey. You're  
3 undercounting, especially chronic homelessness.

4 REPRESENTATIVE MILLER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

5 May I ask for a clarification on your statement,  
6 and then a response to it? Did you say 25 percent of the  
7 veterans are homeless or 25 percent of the homeless are  
8 veterans?

9 MR. GETZ: 25 percent of the homeless are  
10 veterans.

11 REPRESENTATIVE MILLER: I thought you said that  
12 in reverse, and that's why I just wanted to clarify that.

13 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: I may have.

14 REPRESENTATIVE MILLER: No problem. Thank you.

15 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: The other one, General Sajer,  
16 you answered one question I had, which was what the  
17 difference was when you served to what it is today, and you  
18 outlined those three things that certainly answered that  
19 question. But to anyone, I assume the cost is \$3.5 million  
20 is what I'm hearing to have a separate department.

21 I think I know the answer, but my question is, if we  
22 took the \$3.5 million and put it into the current system,  
23 the same amount of money, put the money into the current  
24 system without creating a separate department, is that a  
25 possibility? Would it be better? Would it work? Is it

1 not something we can do or what we should do?

2 General Sajer?

3 MR. SAJER: I think the answer's clearly no.

4 And I think it began with Representative Siptroth's  
5 statement, but you'd have to look at things now in a  
6 different context when you consider a separate department  
7 and what that separate department's going to do. How  
8 much -- what you didn't hear is what contact does this  
9 Bureau and its officers have with VA in Washington.

10 The answer's practically none. And what you got  
11 to realize, this new department and its staff, it's going  
12 to be in touch on a daily basis with the veterans'  
13 department. It has to be. And the point is, we are  
14 looking at something much bigger than what you've been  
15 hearing about in this department.

16 It has grown recently. They keep adding, but it  
17 is not near the system that you need. We're talking about  
18 a different system, a different organization of addressing  
19 veterans. That's what we're talking about here today.  
20 It's not just a matter of dollars and adding a couple guys.  
21 It isn't that at all.

22 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Thank you.

23 And if there are no other questions from  
24 members -- Representative Goodman?

25 REPRESENTATIVE GOODMAN: Thank you, Mr.

1 Chairman. Just for a point of clarity, I think it's  
2 important that we talk a little bit about the history of  
3 this Committee. I've served, I've been in this building  
4 for almost 18 years. As many of you know, I served for  
5 almost 6 years as the Executive Director for Veterans and  
6 Military Affairs Committee along with Rick and many other  
7 people before me.

8           And I understand the passion behind this issue.  
9 I listened to the testimony intently. For many years, the  
10 issue was an increase in the number of state veterans'  
11 homes. We have a very -- we have an increasing number of  
12 veterans and nowhere for them to go. And you can't afford  
13 to get into private veterans' homes, so we as the  
14 Commonwealth need to step up, and we did.

15           Then the movement was a memorial at Fort  
16 Indiantown Gap, Persian Gulf War veterans' bonus, increase  
17 moneys for the Governor's Veterans Outreach Center;  
18 Scotland School needs to be giving back to the veterans.  
19 There have been a lot of -- I can go on and on. There have  
20 been a lot of issues that the General Assembly and this  
21 Committee has undertaken.

22           I know that a separate department has been an  
23 issue for many years, but I don't think the time was maybe  
24 as ripe as it is now. We've been involved in two wars  
25 since. The Department of Military Affairs -- or the, we

1 should say the military side was not as active as it is  
2 now. It is extremely active now. We have more people in  
3 combat than any other Guard. We've gone from -- what I can  
4 remember, what Fort Indiantown Gap looked like when I first  
5 started working in Harrisburg in 1990 and what it is now,  
6 it's really a different place.

7 I mean, it really is. And the role of the  
8 Adjutant General has grown tremendously. I think even  
9 General Sajer admitted that. The role that our current  
10 Adjutant General is under right now is probably the most  
11 stressful that I have seen in my 18 years. So I -- as they  
12 say in Right Guard, I'm keeping my powder dry, and I'm open  
13 to listen to both sides of this argument.

14 But I think in fairness, to simply say that this  
15 Committee has not been active with our veterans is unfair.  
16 I think we've always listened to what our veterans' needs  
17 are. I served with DJ Lusick (ph), who served two tours of  
18 duty in Vietnam, earned four bronze stars, West Point  
19 Graduate. I mean, the needs of the veterans have not  
20 fallen on deaf ears with this Committee.

21 This has been a priority for quite some time,  
22 but maybe the time is now. And I think -- I don't want to  
23 speak for the members of this Committee, but we've always  
24 been receptive, coming from the military side and the  
25 veterans' side. And I think that will continue. Just for



1 a point of clarity, Mr. Chairman.

2 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Thank you, representative  
3 Goodman.

4 Again, if there are no other questions, I thank  
5 you, gentlemen. And, again, enjoy the day in Harrisburg.

6 Representative Zeller, welcome back and enjoy  
7 the day.

8 We'll let the stenographer take five minutes.

9 (A brief recess was taken.)

10 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: I'll introduce the panel, and  
11 I would ask the panel -- we'll go through the panel, and  
12 then if the members have any questions for the panel as a  
13 whole or individually, we'll follow the same format. We  
14 ran a little bit over.

15 I apologize to this panel. But we have Paul  
16 Hastings, Chairman of the State Veterans Commission; Kit  
17 Watson, Department Adjutant of the American Legion; Neil  
18 Appleby, Blind Veterans Association; and Tim Dunn, Disabled  
19 American Veterans.

20 Mr. Hastings, did you want to start?

21 MR. HASTINGS: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, members  
22 of the Subcommittee with House Military and Veterans  
23 Affairs Preparedness Committee. Allow me to introduce  
24 myself to the Committee members. I'm sorry that  
25 Representative Beyer has departed. I wanted to thank her

1 for her service, but I certainly thank the other veterans  
2 here for their service. My name's Paul Hastings, retired  
3 Marine after 22 years of active service with the United  
4 States Marine Corps and Reserve. I separated and retired  
5 in 1972 with a medical disability. I've been active with  
6 the veterans' issues since that date.

7           As a past National Commandant of the Marine  
8 Corps League, I was appointed to the State Veterans  
9 Commission by the 41st Governor of the Commonwealth of  
10 Pennsylvania in 1984 as the Vietnam veteran representative  
11 on the Commission. I've been re-appointed by each of the  
12 subsequent governors when my four-year term of office came  
13 up for re-appointment.

14           My peer members of the Veterans Commission  
15 elected me as their Chairman in 1991, and I have served in  
16 that capacity until present. Although some may not think  
17 so, I believe we have accomplished a lot for the veterans  
18 of this Commonwealth over the past 24 years that I served  
19 on the Commission. The Vice Chairman of the Commission  
20 will go into some of those accomplishments and details when  
21 he testifies.

22           Over the years, the veterans' organizations have  
23 felt that a separate Department of Veterans Affairs would  
24 be beneficial for the veterans here in Pennsylvania to  
25 mirror that of the federal government when the feds

1 elevated their position to a separate department, the  
2 Veterans Affairs Secretary. Frankly, since Pennsylvania  
3 Legislature elevated the Deputy Adjutant General for  
4 Veterans Affairs to the position of General Sajer, the  
5 veterans have had a major voice in the causes for veterans'  
6 issues here in Pennsylvania, not only with the Adjutant  
7 General, but also with the Governor and the Legislature.

8           And we can certainly thank the Legislature for  
9 being very supportive for the veterans and our military,  
10 especially the National Guard members of the Commonwealth.  
11 You have listened to our needs and desires, and you have  
12 supported us. We have gratitude to you for listening and  
13 acting when asked.

14           Just last year, we asked you to support our  
15 legislative effort to bring help and assistance to the  
16 veterans' organizations by supporting the Service Officer  
17 Program. We are asking for your continued support to  
18 assist in expanding that program so that the veterans  
19 returning can obtain their rightful benefits that they are  
20 entitled to receive from the federal government.

21           This program was just getting off the ground,  
22 and I believe it will pay huge dividends to the  
23 Commonwealth. As for the separate department issue, it is  
24 my opinion that we do not need to spend millions of dollars  
25 to create a new department at this time. The current

1 arrangement is satisfactory and has been satisfactory in my  
2 opinion for many years.

3           There seems to be a push by some who would think  
4 otherwise. In my opinion, those that have made their  
5 voices known to you really do not have the support of many  
6 of the veteran organizations. Nothing reported in the  
7 Defense Solution study would show a need for separate  
8 Department of Veterans Affairs.

9           In fact, their study consisted of about two  
10 hours of review and contact with members of Veterans  
11 Commission. And I'd like to review a report of the work  
12 study group that was appointed by myself as the Chairman of  
13 Veterans Commission.

14           As you know, Pennsylvania Senate Resolutions 124  
15 and 131 called on the Legislative Budget and Finance  
16 Committee to assess Pennsylvania veterans' services and to  
17 determine the advantages and disadvantages of creating a  
18 separate cabinet-level department of veterans' affairs.  
19 The Legislative Budget and Finance Committee contracted  
20 with Defense Solutions, LLC, to conduct this study.

21           On October the 3rd, 2007, the LB and FC released  
22 the report to the public. Copies of the report were made  
23 available to veterans' service organizations on that date.  
24 The State Veterans Commission met on December the 5th, two  
25 days later, for their regular monthly meeting. And the

1 Chairman, myself, presented the report to the members of  
2 the Commission for consideration and further requested  
3 comments regarding the report at the next meeting to be  
4 held on November the 2nd.

5           Subsequent to the October 5th Veterans  
6 Commission meeting, Chairman of the Veterans Commission  
7 received a letter dated October the 9th of 2007 from the  
8 Executive Assistant of Defense Solutions addressed to  
9 Senator John Pippy, Chairman of the Legislative Budget and  
10 Finance Committee, and requested that a copy of that letter  
11 be provided to the members of Veterans Commission, which  
12 was accomplished at that November 2nd meeting.

13           At the November 2nd meeting, the Veterans  
14 Commission, the Chairman appointed a work study group  
15 consisting of myself and several members of the Commission  
16 to review the Defense Solutions report in detail and make a  
17 report to the Veterans Commission.

18           The members of the work group included the Vice  
19 Chairman, Mr. Appleby, of the Commission; the Commanders of  
20 the AMVETS Department of Pennsylvania; the Disabled  
21 American Veterans Department of Pennsylvania; the President  
22 of County Directors of Veterans Affairs Association; the  
23 Adjutants of the American Legion; Veterans of Foreign Wars;  
24 and Disabled American Veterans, all departments in  
25 Pennsylvania, and the Executive Director of AMVETS

1 Department of Pennsylvania.

2 Other members of the Commission were invited to  
3 attend the meetings of the work group. The designated work  
4 group met on November the 14th last year and reviewed the  
5 Defense Solutions study in detail and specifically reviewed  
6 the recommendations that made, that were made, enumerated  
7 on page 108 of that study report.

8 The specific comments of recommendations of the  
9 work group as they pertained to the study recommendations  
10 are as follows -- and a member of MOAA, Military Officers  
11 Association, was also present.

12 Study recommendation number 1, the study  
13 recommends the creation of a separate cabinet-level  
14 department of veterans' affairs from assets belonging to  
15 the current Bureau of Veterans Affairs within the  
16 Department of Military and Veterans Affairs.

17 The response by the work group, after detailed  
18 review of the study as presented, it was the opinion of the  
19 members of the work group that the study was nonconclusive,  
20 and therefore, does not, by itself, prove the need for a  
21 separate department of veterans' affairs.

22 The study recommendation number 2, and I quote,  
23 is recommended that the Department recognize and support,  
24 but have no control over the following commissions,  
25 councils and boards: The State Veterans Commission, the

1 War Veterans Council, the Advisory Council organized and  
2 each state operate a Veterans Center; the trustee  
3 organization for Scotland School for Veterans Children;  
4 other veterans' councils and commissions that may be formed  
5 from time to time.

6 Response by the work group, the members of the  
7 work group were not sure whether the recommendations were  
8 referring to the current Department of Veterans Affairs or  
9 the proposed new department of veterans' affairs, as  
10 recommended in the first recommendation.

11 In either case, the work group did not consider  
12 the recommendation as applicable in view of the work  
13 group's response for the need of a new department at this  
14 time. The work group definitely does not concur with the  
15 recommendation if it is meant to apply to the current  
16 Department of Military and Veterans Affairs.

17 Study recommendation number 3, the Department  
18 establish and enforce standards for appointment as the  
19 state and county veterans' service officer and that the  
20 Department be assigned responsibility for all nonfederal  
21 veterans' programs administered within the Commonwealth, to  
22 specifically include the management, oversight and funding  
23 of the Governor's Veterans Outreach Assistance Center; and  
24 if the new department, if created, review possible changes  
25 to the County Directors of Veterans Affairs, a provision of

1 the County Code.

2           Response from our work group, this study has  
3 several recommendations within this total recommendation so  
4 the work group addressed each part; part A, regarding the  
5 Department establishing and enforce standards for  
6 appointments as state and county veterans' service officer,  
7 the Federal Department of Veterans Affairs provides rules  
8 and regulations regarding the appointment of accredited  
9 nationally VA recognized veterans' service officers to  
10 handle claims within the U.S. Department of Veterans  
11 Affairs; number B, regarding the Department be assigned  
12 responsibility for all nonfederal veterans' programs  
13 administered within the Commonwealth, the Department  
14 currently oversees such programs within the Commonwealth as  
15 currently comes within their purview.

16           This would require the Department of Labor and  
17 Industry and the Department of Education and other  
18 departments to give up their responsibilities to administer  
19 programs specifically within their purview and is not  
20 feasible and appropriate in the opinion of the members of  
21 this work group; number C, regarding the oversight and  
22 funding of the Governor's Veterans Outreach and Assistance  
23 Centers, the work group believes this program should be  
24 reviewed in detail as to whether they should be continued  
25 or modified as to their continued purpose since it would



1 appear that the GOVACs are not performing their duties as  
2 they were originally intended to perform when they were  
3 first established years ago; and the last part of that  
4 recommendation, number D, regarding the review of possible  
5 changes to the County Directors of Veterans Affairs  
6 provisions of the County Code, the work group concurs that  
7 the provisions of the County Code should be reviewed as  
8 they pertain to the County Directors of Veterans Affairs.

9           Now, the study recommendation number 4, which  
10 was, quote, retain a Scotland School for Veterans Children  
11 and restore its facilities to good working order. Response  
12 by the work group, the members of the work group  
13 wholeheartedly concur the recommendation that Scotland  
14 School for Veterans Children be retained. The facility and  
15 the school absolutely needs restoration and/or replacement  
16 in some cases.

17           Recommendation number 5, (inaudible) response by  
18 the work group, not applicable in view of response of  
19 recommendation number 1.

20           The study recommendation number 6, quote, should  
21 a department of veterans' affairs be created, it is  
22 recommended that appeals for denial of benefits under the  
23 Department's many programs be addressed to the Secretary of  
24 the Department rather than to the Adjutant General as the  
25 current law provides. Again, it would go back to our

1 response to recommendation number 1.

2           Regarding study recommendation number 7,  
3 education gratuity program raise the monthly benefit to not  
4 less than \$750 per semester or term. In response by the  
5 work group, the members of the work group must point out  
6 that this benefit is not a monthly benefit per semester or  
7 term as stated in the study recommendation. It is a  
8 gratuity per semester or term.

9           The work group believes that the benefit for  
10 educational gratuity to the children of 100 percent  
11 disabled veterans should be increased to \$1 thousand from  
12 the current \$5 hundred per semester or term regardless of  
13 financial need of the student and that the current law be  
14 brought up accordingly, and I understand there's a bill  
15 that's been submitted to do that. I'm not sure whether the  
16 bill that's been submitted has eliminated to the need. I  
17 understand the need is still in there.

18           Study recommendation number 8 and 9 regarding  
19 Blind Veterans Pension and Paralyzed Veterans Pension, to  
20 raise the monthly benefit to not less than \$2 hundred a  
21 month. In response by the work group, the members of the  
22 work group concur in the study recommendations regarding  
23 the Blind Veterans Pension positions.

24           In addition, the work group believes the law  
25 should allow for annual or bi-annual cost of living

1 increases. And I believe there's a -- and I know there's a  
2 bill that's been proposed to increase that.

3           Study recommendation number 10, the State  
4 Veterans Commission changed title 51 PACS to perform  
5 service on the State Veterans Commission by honorable  
6 discharge veteran. The response by the work group, the  
7 members of the work group do not concur with the study  
8 recommendations regarding permitting the service of  
9 Veterans Commission to any honorably discharged veteran.

10           We believe that service of the Veterans  
11 Commission is appropriate as now listed in the current law  
12 with possibly two minor modifications. The first would be  
13 to remove the representative of World War I veterans, and  
14 the second would be to allow voting for the current  
15 nonvoting adjutants of the American Legion of Disabled  
16 Veterans, Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Executive  
17 Director of AMVETS. Further, the Governor currently has  
18 the authority to appoint any honorably discharged veteran  
19 to the four member at-large slots as appropriate.

20           Study recommendation number 11, War Veterans  
21 Council permits service on a War Veterans Council to any  
22 honorably discharged veteran. The response by the work  
23 group, the members of the work group do not concur with  
24 this recommendation since the Pennsylvania War Veterans  
25 Council has its own bylaws and membership rules and

1 regulations as a separate association of veterans'  
2 organization and not controlled by the State Legislature.

3           As an aside, the Defense Solutions study group  
4 met with the members of the Pennsylvania War Veterans  
5 Council for less than an hour to discuss veteran issues  
6 with member representatives of the organization of War  
7 Veterans Council.

8           Regarding study recommendation number 12, hold  
9 Governor's Outreach Assistant Center, transfer the GOVAC to  
10 a new veterans' department, if created or immediately  
11 implement a 24-year-old agreement by the DMVA. Response by  
12 the work group, please see the response under  
13 recommendation number 3 above paragraph C.

14           Technically, there are not seven GOVACs as  
15 stated in this study. There are only five centers under  
16 the original program, although seven are currently funded  
17 as stated in the study.

18           CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: In the interest of time, can  
19 we --

20           MR. HASTINGS: I'm on the last two paragraphs.

21           CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Okay.

22           MR. HASTINGS: The work group hereby submits the  
23 report of the Veterans Commission at the December meeting,  
24 and it strongly recommends that the comments be made  
25 available to the members of the House and the Senate, which

1 was done. In the work group, by the final meeting, which  
2 approved this report, was a Commander of American Legion  
3 Department of Pennsylvania; Commander of the VFW Department  
4 of Pennsylvania, Mr. John Getz; Mr. Robert Miller; Mr.  
5 Larry Kelly (ph), Department Commander of the Disabled  
6 American Veterans; Mr. George Mellon (ph), Department  
7 Adjutant of Veterans of Foreign Wars; Mr. Kit Watson,  
8 Department Adjutant for the American Legion; Mr. Tim Dunn,  
9 Department Adjutant of Disabled American Veterans; Mr. Tom  
10 (inaudible), the Department Executive Director of AMVETS;  
11 Mr. Carmen DiSanti (ph), Department Service Officer of  
12 Veterans of Foreign Wars; Mr. David Sandman (ph), Director  
13 of Communication Veteran of Foreign Wars Department of  
14 Pennsylvania, and myself. And Mr. Appleby, who was away at  
15 the time, concurred on the final report. Thank you. I'd  
16 be happy to respond to any questions you may have.

17 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Thank you. We'll do the  
18 panel first, and then we'll do the questions. Okay. Thank  
19 you.

20 Mr. Watson?

21 MR. WATSON: Mr. Chairman, distinguished  
22 Committee members, I appreciate the opportunity to speak  
23 with you today. Kudos to Representative Goodman and  
24 Representative Solobay for wanting to hear the other side  
25 of the story and understanding that there is another side

1 of the story. I'm disappointed that the shots were fired  
2 by Representative Beyer, and she couldn't be here today.

3 We all have jobs. We all work more than 40  
4 hours a week, as I'm sure you guys do, and we had to  
5 schedule this to be here today. And I'm sorry that she  
6 couldn't have stayed around to hear our side and ask some  
7 questions.

8 I'm saddened and disappointed and a little  
9 embarrassed that we are here discussing expending more  
10 Commonwealth funds to create a separate department of  
11 veterans' affairs when the ink is barely dry on Senate Bill  
12 915 or Act 66. Is it just me, or does it appear we are  
13 assuming this service officers' initiative is expected to  
14 fail, thus strengthening the argument for a separate  
15 department?

16 Surely as the passage of Senate Bill 915, which  
17 passed unanimously in both the House and the Senate, our  
18 VSOs would be afforded the opportunity to show how we can  
19 improve service for our veteran population. It is  
20 imperative to remember that the one fact that helped gained  
21 support, wide support, was from the VA figure, a snapshot  
22 in time of what the four big VSOs, the four major VSOs  
23 brought in.

24 We didn't go -- and we used VA figures to  
25 substantiate this, to the tune of \$58 million the month of

1 March 2007. All other checks, it was right around that  
2 area the whole year through, \$58 million in one month. You  
3 heard a lot of facts and figures today. That's a  
4 verifiable fact that I'm sure you all have staffs that can  
5 go out, bean counters or whatever, and check those out. It  
6 must also be noted that our clients, most of our clients  
7 are not members, are not required to be members for us to  
8 represent them.

9           So you heard about 20 percent or whatever  
10 belongs to the Legion. Actually, the Pennsylvania VSOs  
11 rate number one, at least the American Legion does. We  
12 have more veterans percentagewise in Pennsylvania belonging  
13 to the American Legion than from any other state in our  
14 national organization. We represent 230 thousand members,  
15 not under 230 thousand members, and we were the only VSO  
16 that grew last year nationally.

17           The concept of a separate department, well, we  
18 did that without, that \$58 million was done without any  
19 outside funding whatsoever. The concept of the separate  
20 department will speak for all veterans and increase the  
21 monetary funds from the federal government is just plain  
22 wrong. Most VSOs are capable and willing to be our  
23 veterans' population advocates.

24           These wanna-be guys in charge will not have the  
25 stage to further their cause, so I'm assuming they're going

1 to look to a separate department to give them the voice  
2 they so want to have. The cost of a separate department  
3 would be much more efficiently spent increasing and  
4 expanding our service officers' work, and there again, your  
5 staffs can look into it. The \$3.5 million figure, no way.  
6 True fact, there are more Pennsylvania veterans currently  
7 receiving compensation, 107,403 veterans or 10.16 percent,  
8 which is more than at any time in our past history.

9           We're going the right way. There are also  
10 17,058 new claims filed that are waiting approval. That's  
11 not approval through Pennsylvania. That's through the VA,  
12 and we all have, whether it's a separate department or not,  
13 we're all going to have to fight with trying to get the VA  
14 to do these claims. We believe that TAG is doing an  
15 admirable job in managing the various aspects of her  
16 position.

17           We don't always agree with her. That's not what  
18 this is about. Remember, we are in a period of war. Her  
19 track record is pro-veteran, and compared with other  
20 administrations, including some you've heard from here  
21 today, she has proven herself as a true veterans' advocate.  
22 The staff at Fort Indiantown Gap has always been very  
23 helpful to our organization.

24           The six veterans' homes are immaculate, well  
25 run, financially sound and they do a great service for our



1 veteran population and spending our taxpayers' money. Why  
2 didn't General Sajer make this recommendation for a  
3 separate department when he served as TAG? House Bill 344,  
4 though lengthy in content, seems it was hastily put  
5 together and does not remotely address the Veterans  
6 Memorial Trust Fund.

7 I also calls for the formation of a veterans'  
8 advisory group. To my knowledge, no VSO was consulted in  
9 this bill. The American Legion has 230 thousand members  
10 across our state, 830 Posts across our Commonwealth. The  
11 other VSOs also have members from every community, yet they  
12 were not asked for input. If the concept of a separate  
13 department is a better mouse trap, it should be easy to  
14 sell, and that simply hasn't been the case.

15 Pennsylvania War Veterans Council is an  
16 established group of VSOs who all have voices and vote on  
17 issues of veterans population and dealing independently  
18 with the Adjutant General independently. We're not  
19 controlled by anybody. Pennsylvania War Veterans Council  
20 does not receive outside funding and meets regularly to  
21 discuss legislative issues as well as veterans' issues.

22 What, pray tell, is the Pennsylvania War  
23 Veterans role in all this? It seems to be a slap in the  
24 face of all VSOs, including our fellow VFW members. The  
25 small group of Lehigh Valley Military Advisory Council,

1 LVMAC, is once again trying to circumvent the long history  
2 of Pennsylvania VSOs. What motive do they have; power,  
3 control, being able to bypass the established veterans'  
4 community? Who do they speak for and represent, far less  
5 than you've been led to believe.

6 As a veterans' advocate or voice, the separate  
7 department would be, in our opinion, politically motivated  
8 and become the same as the Secretary of VA on the President  
9 of the United States' cabinet, nothing more than the  
10 Administration's mouthpiece. The VSOs, through the  
11 Pennsylvania War Veterans Council and the Pennsylvania  
12 State Veterans Commission, are the best advocates for our  
13 veterans' population, not a self-serving small group who  
14 are looking to control and be compensated as well.

15 It also appears to me that the study by Defense  
16 Solution was not a true and accurate picture of the state  
17 of veterans' affairs in Pennsylvania. The fact that the  
18 contracted study was conducted by someone who was a  
19 candidate for the TAG position should not have happened.  
20 The length of time spent copying and pasting in this report  
21 would have been better spent doing real interviews and  
22 meeting with the veterans' community and VSOs.

23 Paul was polite when he said under an hour. It  
24 was 38 minutes they spend talking to all the VSOs together  
25 in a room. If you look back in our history, you would see

1 there was a push in 1991 to form a separate department. It  
2 was not necessary then, and we don't believe it's necessary  
3 now. Our leadership has been actively recruited by some of  
4 these gentlemen in this room to support a separate  
5 department.

6           The American Legion overwhelmingly rejected a  
7 resolution to support this separate department through our  
8 members, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the  
9 primary reason for this, no one has presented a true case  
10 on showing how a separate department will be good for our  
11 veterans' population. I contend that still holds true  
12 today.

13           Is there more we can accomplish? Absolutely.  
14 The bottom line here, the very bottom line, if anything  
15 came out of this hearing at all is, what's the bottom line?  
16 It doesn't take a staff or a bunch of bean counters to say  
17 it's money. You give the Adjutant General more money,  
18 she's going to do well with it. You want to create a  
19 separate department, they're going to do the same thing.

20           It's going to cost you more money. That's what  
21 the bottom line is. Do you throw the baby out with the  
22 bath water? The separate department, House Bill 344, calls  
23 for setting up an advisory council of wanna-bees, I guess.  
24 We have an established veterans' community. Are we  
25 throwing them out now?

1           I mean, I don't understand. It's all about  
2 control in my opinion. The American Legion stands ready to  
3 work with you and all other VSOs and the veterans of  
4 Pennsylvania on veterans' issues. We all agree we need to  
5 do what's right for our veterans' population. The  
6 distraction of a separate department is not in the best  
7 interest of our veterans. Thank you.

8           CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Mr. Appleby?

9           MR. APPLEBY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the  
10 opportunity to share some thoughts with you.

11           I am Neil Appleby, a retired Navy Senior Chief  
12 Officer. As past National President of the Blinded  
13 Veterans Association, having served on the National Board  
14 of Directors for ten years, two as National President, I am  
15 the second emeritus of the Blinded Veterans Association of  
16 Pennsylvania, having served 25 years as Secretary  
17 Treasurer.

18           I currently am the President of the Advisory  
19 Council at Hollidaysburg and finishing my 20th year on that  
20 council. And two-and-a-half years ago, I was appointed by  
21 the Governor to a member at large seat on the State  
22 Veterans Commission, and I'm currently the Vice Chairman.  
23 I'm also a nationally-accredited service officer holding  
24 accreditation cards from the Blinded Veterans Association  
25 and the Marine Corps League.

1           That said, I'm going to tell you what Mark Twain  
2 said one time. If you do not read a newspaper, you are  
3 uninformed. If you read a newspaper, you are ill  
4 informed -- misinformed -- excuse me. I say to the readers  
5 of the Allentown Morning Call, don't take everything you  
6 read for gospel. None of the gospel writers was named  
7 Richard.

8           Mr. Chairman, the veterans' service  
9 organizations are our own best advocate. And I went back  
10 into the history books and Representative Goodman had  
11 mentioned something. He and I have the same name, but he  
12 spells his funny. I went back a little bit further in the  
13 books, and I just want to address the bonus programs that  
14 the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has given to our veterans  
15 over the years.

16           In 1934, we awarded bonuses to the Spanish  
17 American War veterans, the China Relief Expedition and  
18 World War I veterans; in 1947, World War II; in 1957,  
19 Korean Conflict; 1968, Vietnam Conflict; 1972, Vietnam  
20 Conflict POW; 2006, the Merchant Marine and World War II  
21 veterans and the Persian Gulf Conflict veteran. Now, our  
22 veterans' homes system is the finest in the nation, and I  
23 can tell you this from fact because I've traveled the  
24 nation.

25           I've talked to other folks. And when the state

1 of California, probably about 10 years ago, wanted to get  
2 into the state home business, they came to Pennsylvania to  
3 see how we are doing it. Now, most of ours are single  
4 structures or in pristine campuses. Because of  
5 construction out there, they built high-rise facilities.  
6 In any case, a Pennsylvania Soldiers' and Sailors' home was  
7 dedicated in February 1886.

8 Hollidaysburg veterans' home was dedicated in  
9 June of 1977. And it's interesting that the Pennsylvania  
10 War Veterans Council was named by governors to be the Site  
11 Selection Committee for the following homes: Southeast  
12 Veterans Center was dedicated in January 1985; the  
13 Northeast Veterans Center dedicated in January of 1994, and  
14 it was later renamed the Geno Murray (ph) Veterans Center  
15 in July of 2002; Southwest Veterans Center was dedicated  
16 July of 1997, and the Delaware Valley Veterans Home was  
17 dedicated in November of 2002.

18 The need for a seventh home, a study is  
19 currently underway, and the State Veterans Commission will  
20 get involved with a work group working with the contractor  
21 that's providing the study. Let's talk about Scotland  
22 School, sir. Scotland School used to be managed by a  
23 secretary, the Secretary of Education. During the Casey  
24 Administration, he proposed closing the school. The school  
25 suffered from benign neglect.

1 Under the Secretary of Education, we, the  
2 veteran community, peacefully rallied, and the school was  
3 eventually transferred to the Department of Military  
4 Affairs. I can remember before the new east wing was  
5 built, we ringed it as a Capitol building with veterans and  
6 walked around and got the attention of you, the  
7 Legislature, and the Governor.

8 And eventually, kicking and screaming, the  
9 Department of Military Affairs took the school, but they  
10 have done an outstanding job. And we're going to go to  
11 graduation there on Saturday. We'll be very proud. Our  
12 State Veterans Commission, there's some dispute as to when  
13 the Commission was first established.

14 I can't find it on Google, but one of the  
15 members thinks he went on in 1960. He may have a little  
16 dementia right now, so I'm not really sure. But in any  
17 case, my first reference to the Commission was in some  
18 legislation in 1988 that was introduced here, and the  
19 Commission was given to the Department of Military Affairs  
20 as an administrative body.

21 Now, what did the Commission do? We  
22 administered and have oversight on the state veterans'  
23 homes system; again, Scotland School, the Disabled Veterans  
24 Real Estate Tax Exemption; the Veterans Emergency  
25 Assistance; the Blind Pension, of which I am a

1 recipient -- and when we first started, when I first was  
2 received the pension, it was \$50; it eventually grew to  
3 150, and I think with this legislation, Paul said, pending  
4 to increase it to 200 -- the Paralyzed Veterans Pension;  
5 the Education Gratuity; Pennsylvania Veterans Memorial  
6 Trust Fund. Okay. On the national --

7 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Mr. Appleby, in the interest  
8 of getting to Mr. Dunn, could we wrap it up in about two  
9 minutes?

10 MR. APPLEBY: Yes, sir, we can. Did you say two  
11 minutes?

12 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Two, if you may.

13 MR. APPLEBY: All right. So the National  
14 Cemetery System, we -- first of all, there are people who  
15 say we should get a state cemetery, and that's good. The  
16 federal government would give you some money and they'll  
17 buy you a back hoe and a dump truck and a lawn mower and  
18 then good-bye, and then we're coming to the Legislature  
19 yearly to upkeep the, up our maintenance of the state  
20 cemetery. We've held off.

21 We've had national cemeteries, Indiantown Gap,  
22 the Cemetery of the Alleghenies; and we have the new one  
23 coming at Washington Crossings. On the VA healthcare, of  
24 course, there was a move afoot about 15 years ago, 12 years  
25 ago for the VA, where instead of having 150 medical



1 centers, they threw all these medical centers into  
2 networks.

3 Pennsylvania's the largest network having 10  
4 facilities. The first network where the Director wanted  
5 his jobs was to, he wanted to close Altoona, Butler and  
6 Erie. Who rallied and saved those VA medical centers? The  
7 veterans themselves. So today, they did cut back on some  
8 of their inpatients and operations and stuff and  
9 centralizing it in Pittsburgh.

10 However, they've created 42 community-based  
11 outpatient centers. And the veterans up there in  
12 Schuylkill County, they can go to Pottsville. They don't  
13 have to come all the way down here to Lebanon. So here's  
14 one, the last one I wanted to tell you about, sir, and  
15 probably very few people, if anybody, know about this.

16 We, the Blinded Veterans Association, wanted to  
17 treat blinded veterans and any blinded veteran regardless  
18 of whether he's service connected or not. He's entitled to  
19 blind rehabilitation. Legal blindness is the only  
20 qualification. We created a program down at Lebanon, and  
21 over the past eight years, we have identified in this area  
22 here, Pennsylvania, over 3 hundred veterans who were never  
23 known to the VA or the BVA as being legally blind.

24 Interestingly enough, the National VA now likes  
25 that program eight years later, and they're turning the

1 program and making it national. Sir, I'll call it a day  
2 right here just by saying I've served under four adjutant  
3 generals, and General Wright can, in the vernacular of the  
4 day, she can multi-task. She's an outstanding leader. She  
5 takes care of the soldiers, the airmen and the veterans.

6 And if anybody would see that, even General  
7 Wagner here, and say that he wouldn't have the respect of a  
8 secretary when he goes to Washington, they're whistling up  
9 the street. General Wagner came to us six months ago when  
10 the previous deputy retired. He hit the ground running.  
11 We are well served. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

12 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Thank you, Mr. Appleby.

13 Mr. Dunn?

14 MR. DUNN: Mr. Chairman and Committee members, I  
15 wish to thank you for granting me the opportunity to  
16 address you today on the issue of a separate department of  
17 veterans affairs for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. We  
18 have something in common. I'm also a teacher. But my name  
19 is Timothy Dunn. I am a past State Commander of the  
20 Disabled American Veterans.

21 I'm a past President of the Pennsylvania War  
22 Veterans Council, and I currently serve as the Adjutant for  
23 the Disabled American Veterans. And I'll correct some  
24 misinformation Mr. Jackson said, or I guess were included  
25 in the smaller organizations that have around 1 thousand

1 members. We have over 50 thousand members in the state of  
2 Pennsylvania, and we have chapters in all counties of the  
3 state.

4           Basically, I just wish to question if the push  
5 for a separate department of veterans affairs is in the  
6 best interest of our Commonwealth's taxpayers and veterans.  
7 In regard to the bill that we're discussing today, which  
8 was spawned by the October 3rd, 2007 study that  
9 Mr. Ringgold's firm conducted, I do agree that there were  
10 some positive suggestions offered.

11           However, a separate department was not one of  
12 those suggestions. Mr. Hastings mentioned the November  
13 2nd, 2007 work group. I'm a little bit confused because  
14 there were representatives from the VFW there, and today I  
15 was a little bit thrown aback because they're now here  
16 advocating for something that just a few months ago, they  
17 didn't seem to advocate for.

18           Specific in the study's one point that suggests  
19 the new agency would cost over \$4.3 million -- and this  
20 does not take into account items like legal, information  
21 technology building and vehicle maintenance, building space  
22 utilities and so on. And it has been estimated that the  
23 total cost for this new department would be in the tens of  
24 millions just to get it running for the Commonwealth.

25           As the Chairman mentioned previously today, I

1 suggest to you that all homeless veterans and those that  
2 are out there now in these tough economic times that are  
3 struggling to feed their families could better use the  
4 money than a group of bureaucrats, and it will be a group  
5 of bureaucrats. I guarantee you that. Page 91 of their  
6 study -- and this figure somehow has been dropped by the  
7 individuals that testified earlier this morning, but they  
8 estimate the cost for a new department as being \$4,320,499.

9           The VFW and other organizations here today were  
10 instrumental in getting Senate Bill 915 passed. I'm a  
11 member of the VFW. I have many good friends sitting here  
12 behind me that are VFW members, and I'll testify to you  
13 they worked diligently on the bill as well as many others.  
14 That's a good bill for veterans, and this is a chance for  
15 us to reach and provide service to Pennsylvania's 2.2  
16 million veterans.

17           And the funding, as was mentioned, is not  
18 guaranteed, and we could use your support in making sure we  
19 do get that funding so we can do that. But I really don't  
20 see how a separate department can benefit us in that goal  
21 of serving our Pennsylvania's veterans. Act 66 is a great  
22 example of the current group of veterans' organizations  
23 working together for the good of all veterans, and the bill  
24 was passed.

25           I had individuals in this building come up to

1 me, and they're shocked. The bill was passed in record  
2 time, and that was a result of all the veterans'  
3 organizations working together to get the job done to help  
4 our veterans. And that's proof that the system that's  
5 currently in place does work. And I would be remiss if I  
6 didn't include this as well: I've worked alongside General  
7 Wright and her staff for the past three years in making  
8 certain that veterans throughout the Commonwealth are well  
9 taken care of.

10 In my professional opinion, there is no  
11 individual better qualified within the state to advocate  
12 for veterans, and she and her staff have done their job  
13 admirably. I do not think Mr. Ringgold or the members of  
14 the Lehigh Valley Veterans Military Affairs Council, while  
15 willing, are able to fight for veterans in the same manner  
16 as General Wright.

17 I'm begging this Committee to reach the  
18 conclusion that the increased expenses to Pennsylvania  
19 taxpayers will not in a major way benefit Pennsylvania  
20 veterans by creating a separate department of veterans'  
21 affairs. Thank you, and I'm open for any questions that  
22 you may have.

23 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Representative Goodman?

24 REPRESENTATIVE GOODMAN: Thank you,  
25 Mr. Chairman.

1           Gentlemen, I only have one copy of, I believe it  
2 was your testimony.

3           MR. WATSON: Yeah, that's mine.

4           REPRESENTATIVE GOODMAN: If the other three  
5 testifiers would supply the Committee, it would be very  
6 useful and deeply appreciated. The panel brings up many  
7 good points as did the first one. I'm, like I said, trying  
8 to look at this open-mindedly. There have been a lot of  
9 good suggestions made today in ways we could possibly make  
10 the Department stronger, but I guess I go back to my old  
11 roots, that to show the need for a new department, you  
12 first have to convince me that the old one's broken.

13           And I don't see that. To me, we have a very  
14 good system. We have a State Veterans Commission that is  
15 made up of a very wide variety of veterans' organizations,  
16 some of them are appointed by the Governor; some of them  
17 are created by the General Assembly. Then you have the PA  
18 War Veterans Council, and I have said it on many PA War  
19 Veterans Council meetings, and no one tells the War  
20 Veterans Council what to do.

21           So I think we have a very good system in place  
22 right now because we get a very open and honest and unified  
23 voice coming from our veterans' community on a statewide  
24 level. When the PA War Veterans Council or the State  
25 Veterans Commission or the Adjutant General comes to us,

1 it's usually with a unified voice, as proof by Act 66, and  
2 they say to us, this is what the veterans of the  
3 Commonwealth of Pennsylvania wants and need, and we listen  
4 to that.

5           To suggest that we need a separate department  
6 would mean that the current system is not working, and I  
7 just don't see that. But I am willing to listen to all  
8 sides of the story here. I think your testimony today,  
9 gentlemen, was very compelling, and I really do -- I have  
10 to point out one -- I did write one note here while you  
11 were speaking.

12           Appointing a Secretary of Veterans Affairs would  
13 be nothing more than a mouthpiece for the Governor or the  
14 General Assembly. That's very true, I think. And I can  
15 say that because I'm not insulting anyone because there is  
16 no such thing right now as a Director or a Secretary of  
17 Veterans Affairs, but it would be very difficult for a  
18 person to weigh their position as the secretary when they  
19 are appointed by the Governor.

20           And currently, no one tells the War Veterans  
21 Council or State Veterans Commission what to say or do, and  
22 I think that's a compelling argument. But like I said, I'm  
23 willing to listen to all sides because I do respect  
24 Representative Siptroth for having the courage to step  
25 forward with this and give us this opportunity to make this

1 issue.

2 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

3 CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Thank you, Representative  
4 goodman.

5 Representative Siptroth?

6 REPRESENTATIVE SIPTROTH: Thank you very much,  
7 Mr. Chairman.

8 And I'd just like to remind the gentlemen in  
9 front of us and the other testifiers here today -- and I do  
10 thank you ever so much for coming out because it's  
11 important certainly to have all sides of any particular  
12 issue addressed. And this -- what I would like to say is  
13 that this bill, House Bill 344, although given a different  
14 number, was initially introduced in 2006.

15 So, you know, we have had lots of opportunity  
16 for folks to come and see me, which not too many have. But  
17 nonetheless, I always open the door to my office to anyone.  
18 I do have correspondence here on War Veterans letterhead, a  
19 letter dated January the 17th, 2008, thanking all of us for  
20 passing Senate Bill 915.

21 And, yeah, it's a step in the right direction.  
22 There's not question about it, but it wasn't the belief or  
23 the need, that I feel, to separate the two departments.  
24 General Wright is doing an excellent job, no question about  
25 that. What will happen with the next Adjutant General,



1 we're not sure. And that's why I want to provide the  
2 protection of all the veterans from henceforth, so that  
3 this is not directed at the current Adjutant General or the  
4 Bureau.

5           Mr. Hastings, you had indicated L and I  
6 programs, dispersements that are forthcoming from L and I.  
7 In the state, we often transfer the responsibilities,  
8 whether it be L and I or any other portion of the state, to  
9 other programs, the dispersements of funds to various  
10 programs.

11           And that's a transition that's done smoothly,  
12 and I don't think that there would necessarily be a  
13 particular problem with just transferring the  
14 responsibility of dispersement of funds from one particular  
15 department to another particular department. And I, again,  
16 I want to thank all of you ever so much for coming out.  
17 Because does it leave room for the bill for improvement?  
18 Absolutely. And we welcome that at any time. Thank you  
19 all.

20           CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Thank you, Representative  
21 Siptroth.

22           I have no questions for you, gentlemen, but I do  
23 want to apologize to this panel. We did shortchange you a  
24 little bit on time, and I apologize for that. And I  
25 appreciate the fact that you were able to move along and

1 keep us in the time frame. I would only say that I, as a  
2 co-sponsor of this legislation, agree with my colleague,  
3 Representative Goodman.

4           As a co-sponsor, I still remain open to hearing  
5 both sides. That's the reason we had the Subcommittee  
6 hearing today. One thing I think I did learn today, and  
7 I'm going to recommend to Chairman Melio and Chairman  
8 Fairchild and their staffs that we take a look at what we  
9 get from the federal government and what we may not be  
10 getting from the federal government that we should be  
11 getting and do get entitled to.

12           And I'm going to suggest that they take a look  
13 at that, and if it is within what we believe we should do,  
14 that we would write a letter to our Pennsylvania  
15 Congressional Delegation and United State's Senators  
16 Specter and Casey with respect to what we believe that  
17 maybe they can do on the federal level with aid or whatever  
18 it is we feel we need or maybe are being shortchanged in  
19 Pennsylvania and take it from there.

20           So, again, thank you all for coming. If we  
21 weren't getting kicked out of here at 2:00, I would not  
22 have given a time frame. Still, we had to be out by 2:00,  
23 so I thank you, again, for staying in the guidelines that  
24 we created.

25           Mr. Hastings, do you have --

1           MR. HASTINGS: I just wanted to comment on  
2 Representative Siptroth's comment regarding transfer of  
3 funds.

4           CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Sure.

5           MR. HASTINGS: The transfer of the GOVACs  
6 through the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs and  
7 the funding for that, there was an agreement between the  
8 Secretary of Labor and Industry and the Department, but  
9 when it came the time to transfer the funds, that was the  
10 kicker. So that's why that didn't happen.

11           REPRESENTATIVE SIPTROTH: Okay. I think maybe  
12 just generalizing my comment was that we often shift  
13 responsibilities for dispersement of funds, so that was my  
14 point. Thank you.

15           CHAIRMAN GRUCELA: Thank you, everyone. This  
16 hearing's adjourned.

17           (The hearing was concluded at 2:00 p.m.)

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1           I hereby certify that the proceedings and evidence  
2 are contained fully and accurately to the best of my  
3 ability in the notes taken by me on the within proceedings,  
4 and that this copy is a correct transcript of the same.

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