

REVISED

**Pennsylvania House Veterans Affairs Committee  
Hearing on House Bill 344 of Session 2007**

June 5, 2008 - State Capitol, Harrisburg

**Testimony Supporting House Bill 344 by  
Pennsylvania VFW State Commander John B. Getz, Jr.**



**Pennsylvania Department of Veterans of Foreign Wars  
Largest State VFW in Nation with 120,000 Combat Veterans as Members  
*"Honoring the Deceased by Serving the Living"***

Good morning Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

I am John Getz of Reinholds in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania Department Commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. With me at this table is past VFW State Commander John Brenner of Mt. Wolf in York County and our Junior Vice Commander Frank Mills of Hesston in Huntingdon County, who is in line to be our State Commander in two years. There are numerous other members of our state VFW leadership in attendance here. We are proud to represent that largest state department of the VFW in the nation with 120,000 combat veterans as our members.

We thank the Committee for holding this hearing which is important to the futures of all veterans.

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

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

We want nothing more and expect nothing less than the best for veterans. Those who served our nation and our state in uniform did so honorably and by holding nothing back so we could have the best possible life. They deserve the same from us.

We were very pleased when Governor Rendell, then a candidate for the office, came before VFW members from all over the state and told us that, if elected, he would establish a new Department of Veterans Affairs. Creating a separate Department of Veterans Affairs was a major campaign platform issue for the Governor.

House Bill 344 brings this issue to the forefront. The bill should be seen as one of the most important veterans' bills to come before you in many years. This bill offers a new vision to serving veterans. We urge you to see today's testimony, and the research and discussion that will follow, as leading to not just to a new chapter of service to veterans and their families, but a generational leap forward.

We have been at war against terrorism for five years. By all accounts our nation will be broadly engaged in this fight well into the future and perhaps in other missions. This new generation of heroes coming home and those patriots who served before them represent all that is good in our state and nation. Let's be proactive and show them that if there's a better approach way to serve them that the state will take the necessary steps to get it done.

Some will be broken in mind and spirit and may realize that they need support and services. Others will go back to their civilian lives unaware of how the war will has impacted their lives, which can show up years down the road. Most if not all will need help in one way or another. Their families will need—and deserve—the absolute best assistance should their veteran pass away or become unable to go through the system on his or her own.

Other states took the initiative to dedicate a government agency specifically for veterans' needs. It's time that Pennsylvania uses a Department dedicated to veterans, with a veteran as the cabinet secretary, to elevate veterans service to levels never seen before. The state should look beyond what has worked in the past to bring service to veterans of all ages and their families into the modern era.

In saying this, we do not imply any criticism of any Adjutant General or Administration. Rather, it is our strongly held view that a veteran at the cabinet level, with the power of that position, whose mind and energies are solely focused on the needs and interest of our veterans, would best serve veterans.

This bill would put a new structure in place to meet the current demands and emerging needs of veterans. Today's dual agency was designed for a prior era and for a time when juggling military issues and veterans issues within the same department was easier. The demands for overseeing and managing the State's military assets and veterans affairs have grown well beyond what anyone could have imagined years ago.

The VFW has long called for veterans, veterans groups, lawmakers and state officials to come together to shape the future of veterans service in Pennsylvania. Let's work together to maximize and leverage all of the state's current support systems for veterans through one agency that will bring everything together under one agency. The Secretary would always have the governor's ear as a member of his cabinet to make sure that veterans' issues get priority status.

The Secretary will be able to fully focus on the most important issues to provide once source of contact and response. For example, the Secretary and the new Departmental staff would oversee all facilities, all activities and all services that are for veterans ... federal services and facilities all of the way down to veterans issues coordinated by local governments.

Mr. Chairman, our new Secretary will go to our veterans' hospitals and VA Outpatient Clinics to see how veterans are served and what more can be done by the state or federal government. Our Secretary will be on the phone to the Secretary of Veteran Affairs in Washington to share ideas and to address problem areas.

Today's workforce demands skilled workers, and returning veterans need jobs. Veterans need counseling, education and retraining programs to fill these openings. Our Secretary will work with our Secretary of Education to see that our veterans are getting education benefits. Our Secretary will work with the Secretary of Labor and Industry to assure our veterans are training and placement assistance. Employment counseling should be a part of how the state serves veterans and that includes helping disabled veterans, veterans with post traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injuries to find jobs.

Anything less than the best assistance in these areas could result in more veterans joining the homeless population; veterans already make up around 25% of the homeless. Our Secretary will take an interest in the programs available to help veterans purchase homes. We need to do more in getting homeless veterans back into productive lives. These veterans protected our freedom and deserve better than what is currently available to get them off of the streets.

Having an agency that closely monitored and guided veterans through a great range of federal programs for veterans and family members would be a valuable asset for veterans and the state.

We realize and appreciate the fact that Act 66 was passed to help expand service outreach through veterans' organizations in the short term. The service officers hired with Act 66 funds will direct veterans to disability and pension claims, but they do not specialize in other federal programs that assist veterans. We need a veterans affairs agency that provides an entire continuum of service for veterans.

It is also important to mention that since funding for this grant program is not a guarantee year to year, it should not be seen as a long-term solution. In fact, if the grant monies are cut off or come in at less than the veterans organizations need, they will have to lay off the service officers hired through Act 66.

Keep in mind that with the year-to-year status of the grant funding veterans groups have to spend considerable time begging the governor and state lawmakers for budget dollars. That's not a burden that veterans organization should be saddled with. We have our hands full running our organizations

and reaching out to new members so we can remain strong. By creating a new agency, you could fund greater veterans service outreach through a line item in the agency's budget instead of making veterans organizations come to the Capitol to in effect beg for money each year.

Act 66 was an important step, but it is not the only answer to taking the State's service to veterans into the modern era. There are also other federal benefit programs not covered by service officers. A separate veterans affairs agency could broaden the service Pennsylvania gives in this area and bring even more federal program dollars into Pennsylvania.

We believe that the State should always be researching how it identifies, studies and reacts to veterans' needs, and to be proactive this requires looking to program models from other states for direction.

Mr. Chairman, the times have changed. They changed rapidly. A decade or more ago our veterans greatest need was for veterans homes. In a very caring and generous way our people through our Legislature reacted and over several years gave our veterans a first class veteran home system. If having a separate veterans affairs agency and Secretary would energize the entire veterans' community in similar way, the VFW believes that the state should move in that direction.

As the Commander, I travel to our Posts all over the state and attend events held for veterans and military personnel. As I do, I talk to people about creating a separate Department of Veterans Affairs and we hear sentiments saying that "it's about time."

A few years ago the major veterans groups in the state rallied behind this cause. Collectively, they agreed that creating a new agency was the top legislative priority of the Pennsylvania War Veterans Council. Some veterans groups think that the grant money from Act 66 has changed the entire landscape. While we thank the state for creating the grant program, and while we take great pride in connecting veterans with their federal benefits, we realize that this is not the only area of service that veterans should receive.

Some veterans groups think that the independent study released last year was not of value to addressing the need for a separate veterans affairs agency. While we agree that the study could have been stronger, the results identified numerous key areas that the state needs to respond to if veterans are to be best served. Let's keep the momentum moving toward doing what is best for veterans.

I represent 120,000 combat veterans who expect the best service and support that the state can provide. The other veterans organizations here also represent many veterans. However, you should consider that a large percentage of Pennsylvania veterans don't belong to any of our groups for one reason or another. But they still belong to a band of veteran brothers and sisters, and we have the highest calling and obligation to look after their best interests.

If we are to guarantee our veterans that the State government will stop at nothing to give them the best service and support, then we should be open to using a new concept or new strategies to get us moving there fast. Let's get this right.

The VFW believes that the State's treatment and support of veterans is so important that it should not be subjected to political games or quid pro quo arrangements. We hope everyone agrees.

We ask committee members and all legislators to collectively and carefully weigh the testimony given here and all of the supporting documents. We believe there are too many positive things going on in other states to not consider moving forward with a new approach to give veterans the best the state can offer.

Pennsylvania's proud tradition of military service stands head and shoulders above the rest of the nation. Our system for handling veterans affairs should do the same.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the chance to speak today. I ask for your indulgence for one minute as my State Adjutant John Brenner reminds committee members about some research released by Auditor General Jack Wagner after a statewide series of veterans meetings that he held with now Senator Bob Casey a few years ago.

(Mr. Brenner)

Committee members, a few years ago, Auditor General Wagner release his report called "Pennsylvania Veterans Breakfasts." In the introduction written by former Adjutant General John Patton, Mr. Patton writes that, and I quote, "In many instances the same issues arose at every meeting, such as the need for a separate Department of Veterans Affairs with a cabinet-level rank of secretary within the State's executive branch."

Under the section called statewide consensus issues, item number one, and I quote, "to establish a separate Department of Veterans Affairs with a secretary of cabinet rank and to provide adequate funding for the transition and operation of this new department." The quote ends.

Lastly, under the section of general comments, the text includes the quoted material, "veterans said they believed their concerns were overlooked or neglected. They also said that state and federal officials were falling short in communicating to veterans.

The text continues by stating that numerous veterans said that cabinet-level veterans secretary would help address these issues by cutting through red tape and delivering more assistance more conveniently and faster to veterans.

That section ends by noting that veterans do not want to see funding for other veterans programs reduced to pay for the formation of a new department.

I thank the committee members for allowing us to include these important report conclusions in our testimony.