

**Statement of
Major General Gerald T. Sajer, retired**

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, I am Major General Gerald T. Sajer, retired. Thank you for giving me the privilege of appearing before your Committee. My testimony today is drawn from 49 years of service, Active, Guard and Reserve. I am a veteran of the Korean War where I served as a ranger captain. I am a life member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. My last service was as the Adjutant General of our Commonwealth from 1987 to 1995

My testimony should not be construed as criticism of any administration or adjutant general. I have no such intention. I am looking at this through the prism of my own years of service, including my eight years as the Adjutant General and my perceptions of what I think has occurred since I left that office.

During my eight years in office, the veterans organizations were unified in their support for a separate Department of Veterans Affairs. About midway through my eight years in office, I reached the conclusion that they were right. I saw that the two parts of the Department would both function better if they were separated and independent of each other. But it was not something I could do. Events, as I see them, since I left office, have only strengthened my view.

When I assumed the position of the Adjutant General in 1987, I saw a big military of 24,000 Guardsmen, one of the largest in the country. The Bureau was a small operation with a small headquarters staff and two small veterans nursing homes. The two could run relatively friction free, with the small wheel running in tandem with the big wheel. It was a peacetime environment.

When Governor Casey accepted my proposal for six veteran homes, things began to happen. This was the great need of the aging veteran population at that time and it was a larger population than it is today. We added a new nursing home almost each year. The patient beds went from 391 to 1600, the staff at the homes from 614 to 1752, and the budget grew commensurately. Of course with an increase of so large a magnitude there were more problems in hiring qualified help and in dealing with a patient population very badly in need of health care.

In 1996, The Bureau was given responsibility for the Scotland School. That small wheel was now bigger and frictions between the two develop. There is no synergism between the two. They are separate and distinct

functions. Frictions occur because choices must be made. Who gets the money? Who gets the resources? Who gets the time of the leader? What has priority? Competition for money, competition for time brings conflicts and disappointments. I recall thinking more than once, that I felt like I had two kids to feed but food for only one. Choosing was always uncomfortable. The effort to stay focused on both was not always clear. Especially during war, the priority must be upon the military and getting it ready, of taking care of soldier families and that meant, the duties to veterans had to be given secondary consideration.

While the veteran home expansion was going on, Guard units were being mobilized and deployed in Persian Gulf War I. These were not of the scale we see today. Today we have repeated deployments of thousands.

After the War, I initiated the proposal to convert our 15,000 man walking division to a modern, heavy, mechanized division. Raising a modern heavy division is a complex undertaking. The work load for everyone is far larger than for a mere walking division. Today we have added the Stryker Brigade of machines, marvels of electronic complexity. As I was leaving office, the third base realignment commission assigned responsibility for Fort Indiantown Gap and its training mission to our Guard. In sum, the mission of the Guard has grown bigger, more complex and far more demanding.

Both the military and the Bureau had grown to the point where I was convinced they would each do better if they were separated and functioned independently with the Bureau reorganized and expanded to a Department. With the wartime demands for a trained, ready and deployable Guard, more time must be given to the Guard. At the same time, returning Pennsylvania veterans, Guard, Reserve and Active from all services are placing demands upon the system that far exceed peacetime experience. I think we can only be fair to both if they are separated under different leaders each focused solely on one responsibility.

A separate department with a cabinet level secretary seemed to me to be a far more effective organization to serve our veterans. Having a Secretary who could talk to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs in Washington, his staff people, other federal agencies, and with access to the Governor was and is what is needed. A mere Bureau Director and an Adjutant General who at best can only give part time to the veterans is simply not as effective and cannot fully meet their needs.

Three large on-going trends have increased the requirements and challenges of both the military and the veterans Bureau and these, I think, confirm my earlier judgment that the two should be separated.

For the military, the first trend is caused by the war which has and will require continuous and frequent mobilizations and deployments of thousands of our guardsmen. Not since the Korean War has there been such an unprecedented federal demand upon the Guard for duty overseas. Unparalleled. We can all be very proud that our Guard has answered the call and completed all of their missions in an admirable manner and I congratulate and thank them for all their service to our nation.

What these deployments mean is that the Guard has transitioned into something different than it had been a transition, a transition without parallel in our Guard history. It has gone from being a strategic reserve to an operational reserve. Mr. Chairman, believe me, these are two equines of a much different hue. It is a sea change in the mission of the Guard. The old Guard, of one week end a month and two weeks of summer camp is pretty much a thing of the past. The new Guard is one of frequent deployments. One battalion commander told me his battalion had been deployed overseas three times in five years.

This new use of the Guard brings a whole series of new problems that require solution as efforts are made to meet the new demands. There are the family, the employer and the soldiers themselves. The federal legal structure is still geared to the old Guard. Now a new culture must be adopted and established at the federal and state level to help solve the many problems of Guardsmen in an operational reserve. It is a new era in Guard service.

We are now in our sixth year of war. The demands upon our Guard continue. Looking to the future, the Army staff says, "This is an era of persistent conflict". They are planning for active conflict for years to come. So should we. The greater demands upon our Guard will be with us for years to come. The war will continue to produce veterans and it will continue to produce casualties and they will need more and better help than we are now organized to provide. This is not a matter that we should put off.

The second trend is the historic mission of the Guard to protect and assist our citizens here at home in times of need. We are all familiar with the Guard's role in natural and man-made disasters. To that traditional role we add the new mission of protecting us from terrorism here at home. The threat of terrorist attacks has raised the demands for commitments of our military. Our Guard has responded and will continue to respond to these requirements. We have sent them to our nuclear plants and to our airports. Our long porous borders make us vulnerable to penetration by terrorists and to this threat the Guard will have to respond I am convinced that in this state and many others we have only scratched the surface of the homeland security mission. It is my firm view that the Guard here and

throughout the country must and will be more heavily involved in homeland defense, homeland security and emergency operations. This will require the time and attention of the Adjutant General and the department staff far beyond anything now done. This is a complex matter and will require the time of this Committee, the Legislature and the leadership of the Guard at all levels.

The third trend is with our veteran population and its needs. As I have said, in my time the need was for nursing homes to take care of our aging veteran population. I think we have pretty well taken care of that problem. The demands and needs today are far different. They are for services. The older veteran population still needs health care, and pension and disability claims assistance. To that aging population comes a new generation of veterans home from the wars. Returning them to civilian life requires that a whole set of needs be addressed: jobs, job training, reemployment rights, educational assistance, health care, psychiatric services, claims assistance for service connected disabilities, home financing and other services. The more seriously disabled will require help for years to come.

What this tells you, Mr. Chairman is the focus today for veterans, old and young, has shifted and shifted dramatically from state claims to federal claims and services. I think it requires emphasis, that the Bureau was originally designed solely to deal with state benefit programs. It had no people who were trained, qualified and certified to handle the range of services that today's veterans require. It should be borne in mind that many of these federal programs are designed to be administered by the states. These new demands show that the substantive changes in how we organize into an effective and viable system have not really been addressed, despite recommendations from a series of studies. The Bill before you is designed to make the fundamental changes that are required now and for the future.

It may be asked how will the Guard with its federal and state missions do if the veterans Bureau is put into a separate Department. The answer is unequivocal. They will both do much better. I have already set out why the new Department of Veterans Affairs will do better. Now let me sketch briefly why the Guard will do better. First, the military is relieved of the major responsibility of administering the veterans programs. That frees up valuable time and resources. Second, it allows the leadership and staff to focus solely on military and security missions. That is its basic responsibility. Third, those mission requirements are much larger now than they have been over the last half Century and will last well into the future. Freed up of the veteran responsibility, the leadership of the Guard will be able to focus their minds and their energies solely on this mission and its security mission here at home.

I ask that you not put off the creation of this new Department. The returning young veterans and their families need the most what this new Department can best provide. I am unaware of any good reason to oppose or delay its establishment. It would be an injustice to them to postpone this action for any reason.

Lastly, let us always remember this. Men who risk their lives in combat in the service of our nation, deserve a place of honor above all others in our society. Yes, above all others. For it is their courage that made everything else possible for us. Their courage gave us a country, our independence, our liberties. Their courage protect our way of life and defend our national interests.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I hope you give our veterans their rightful seat of honor, give our veterans a place at the table of our highest executive where their voices can be heard. They earned it. They deserve it. They need it. They have long awaited it.

Please pass this Bill and seat them in that place of honor.

Thank you Mr. Chairman. I would be pleased to answer any questions the members may have.