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Testimony of Colonel Timothy D. Ringgold, Ph.D., Chief Executive Officer, Defense Solutions, Inc., before the Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee, Subcommittee on Military & Veterans Facilities

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, the firm that I lead prepared the report, *A Comprehensive Study and Review of Veteran Services in Pennsylvania*. I had hoped to testify in person about this study and its findings, but urgent matters have required me to remain in Baghdad, Iraq. In lieu of my personal appearance, I ask that this statement be accepted as my testimony. Should the committee wish to have me appear in person, I will make every attempt to meet your schedule in the future.

The study team for this project included senior personnel with a first hand knowledge of the constituent audiences throughout the veteran communities. Each had previously worked for the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, the Pennsylvania National Guard, the Scotland School for Veterans Children and/or other key government and commercial leaders in Pennsylvania. Each study team member was well known to the leadership of the DMVA. One had participated in the earlier study in 1991.

A Comprehensive Study and Review of Veterans Services in Pennsylvania was prepared at the request of the Legislative Budget & Finance Committee to meet the requirements contained in Senate Resolutions 124 and 131, both of which passed the General Assembly unopposed in the Summer of 2005. The study team completed its work in June 2006, made minor adjustments at the Committee's request in September 2006 and the Committee released the report one year later, in October 2007.

Mr. Chairman, we strongly support removing the responsibility for handling veterans' issues from under the Department of Military and Veterans' Affairs and the creation of a separate Department of Veterans Affairs, as proposed by HB344.

Recruiting, training, equipping, and deploying military units and sustaining military operations are increasingly complex tasks. At the same time, veterans' issues continue to grow in number and complexity, and management of these issues is more challenging than ever, both for the veteran and the provider. The skills required to manage military operations are decidedly different than those needed to deliver health care and other benefit programs to veterans. Just as we would find it incomprehensible to place a health care provider in charge of training and deploying combat troops or responding to a domestic emergency, it is just as incomprehensible to put a military commander in charge of caring for an aging population of veterans.

Let's not forget that more than three-quarters of Pennsylvania's 1.1 million veterans are over the age of 50; one-third are over the age of 70. The skills needed to care for this population are simply different than those required in military service.

The security of our great Commonwealth is directly related to the care we provide our veterans. Simply stated, you cannot recruit a future military – or retain a current one – if the word gets out that we do not keep the promises made to those who have served. With troops on the ground defending our interests across the globe, keeping faith is not only the prudent decision – it's the

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

President George Washington gave us an eloquent warning, "The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional to how they perceive the veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by their nation." When signing legislation that established the US Department of Veterans Affairs, President Ronald Reagan echoed the wisdom of our first president's remarks as he said, "America's debt to those who would fight for her defense doesn't end the day the uniform comes off. For the security of our nation, it must not end."

At a time when troops are in harms way protecting our security and defending our cherished freedoms, the General Assembly should rightly be concerned with providing the most cost-effective and efficient means of administering a wide range of benefits to our Commonwealth's 1.1 million veterans. The time to act is now. According to the US Department of Veterans Affairs, in the two years since our study team submitted its interim findings and recommended the creation of a Department of Veterans Affairs, some 70,000 residents of Pennsylvania who were armed forces veterans have passed away.

As our study reported, the provisioning of veterans' benefits in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has been a problem for several decades. Even the most cursory examination reveals inconsistent provisioning of services and benefits, and an arcane and ineffective bureaucracy. During our research, we encountered many well meaning, but largely untrained administrators who guide veterans through the bureaucratic maze to obtain services under Federal or Commonwealth entitlement programs. The healthy and intelligent veterans often find the system agonizingly painful, bureaucratic, inconsistent, and demeaning. Those in ill health or infirm don't find it that pleasant.

Both the Legislative Budget & Finance Committee and the study team throughout the project considered stakeholder input a high priority. Substantial steps were taken during the data collection and discovery phases to interview veterans, veterans' service organizations, veterans' service officers, and administrators and health care providers with a variety of perspectives and involvement in the veteran delivery system across the Commonwealth, from the US Department of Veterans' Affairs, the US Department of Labor, and State Veterans' organizations from other states. Their collective input was a focal point throughout the development of this Study and was an essential element in the decision process.

The stakeholder feedback obtained through the distribution and presentation of the Interim Study was analyzed by the project study team and incorporated to produce a revised version of the report. As necessary, the recommendations were restructured to better align with the long-term and short-term goals of the Legislative Budget & Finance Committee. Once Defense Solutions' recommendations for the enhancement and betterment of veterans' programs and benefits in Pennsylvania were finalized, the project team incorporated them into the Final Study. It was the goal of the project study team that the Final Study be written as specifically as possible to ensure a smooth transition toward a revised veterans' service delivery system and to provide a suitable framework for the legislative decision process.

The incorporation of stakeholder feedback into the Interim Study resulted in minor changes in the findings and recommendations and substantially increased the focus of the Final Report on

the structure and support needed to organize the proposed Department to garner a larger portion of federal funding.

When the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee released the report last October, the Committee's cover letter noted that the Adjutant General of the Department of Military and Veterans' Affairs objected to the methodologies and overall approach of the report. When I interviewed General Wright as part of our research, she stated in clear terms that she would support what is best for veterans. Her more recent statements to the contrary, the data show that what is best for veterans is a separate Department for Veterans Affairs.

In her written statement released as an attachment to our study, General Wright makes a great deal about the "\$53 million in additional benefits (new money) over the last three years" through enhanced outreach (~\$18 million/year); \$4 million in new funding for residents of our state veterans' homes and \$500,000 in bonus payments under the WWII Merchant Marine Veterans' Bonus. However commendable this improved provisioning of services may be, it falls far short of the federal funding that could be obtainable through a well managed and well led Department of Veterans' Affairs. As we reported on page 2 of our study, the potential for additional benefits for Pennsylvania's veterans is in the multi-hundred million dollars per year range:

If Pennsylvania were to invest sufficient resources to bring federal spending for veterans' programs up to the national average, it could produce nearly \$1.4 billion in economic activity in the Commonwealth every year. With 1.67 million veterans – and significantly more claims officers than Pennsylvania – Texas averaged \$3,227 per veteran in federal funding in 2005, an average of \$863 more per veteran than Pennsylvania received. If Pennsylvania were to receive what veterans and veterans' programs in Texas receive, it would total more than \$964 million in direct federal funds and \$2.22 billion in economic activity.

The discrepancy in veterans' funding is real and cannot be attributed to geographical or other environmental discrepancies. For example, New York has virtually the same number of veterans as Pennsylvania – 1.13 million compared to 1.12 million. Yet last year, according to the US Department of Veterans' Affairs, New York received \$725.6 million dollars more from the USDVA than did Pennsylvania. In fact, New York received more federal dollars in every category...

It is my belief, and that of our study team, that a properly resourced and empowered Department for Veterans' Affairs will better advocate for and represent the needs of Pennsylvania's veterans. The facts prove this point. Other States are doing it. Pennsylvania could do it as well.

Should the Committee want to discuss our report or any of the issues related to how best to support Pennsylvania's veterans, we at Defense Solutions stand ready to participate and to assist.

Sincerely,



Timothy D. Ringgold, Ph.D.
Colonel, US Army (Ret)
Chief Executive Officer