

June 4, 2008

Honorable Anthony J. Milio, chairman
Veteran's Affairs and Emergency Preparation Committee
Pennsylvania House of Representatives
Harrisburg, PA 17105

RE: State Department of Military Affairs

Dear Chairman Melio:

I would like to first introduce myself so that you and your honorable committee members will know where I've been and where I'm coming from, so as to establish a feeling of credibility.

I served as Councilman and Mayor of the Borough of Emmaus and was then appointed by former Governor Ray Shafer to the Pennsylvania Crime Commission Planning Council, Region 2, in 1968 serving 12 years under three Governors. In 1971 I was elected to the Pennsylvania House of Representatives where I served five terms from the 134th Legislative District of Lehigh County. During my 10 year tenure I served on the Commission that established the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Association (PEMA) as well as the Veterans and Military Affairs Committee here in the House.

What I want to bring to your attention is something very necessary in serving the public that places one in this position of representing them and that is *credibility* in taking a stand where the pressure becomes almost unbearable from opposition even though the cause be right.

I would like to add that during my legislative tenure, the leaders of both the Pennsylvania House and Senate held Joe Zeller in contempt because I was asked to serve on the Crime Commission as well as seek status as a legislator by then Gov. Ray Shafer to investigate any elected official in Harrisburg who was in violation of State or Federal law. Six legislators and two department secretaries went to Allenwood Federal Prison including the Speaker of the House, the Senate leader, four committee chairs and two department secretaries, all prosecuted under the Rico Act, applicable because each case involved two or more violations. *So you can understand that I was not a favorite of the Leadership in the Pennsylvania Legislature.*

OK...now you ask what this has to do with what the subject of today's hearing? The answer is that we are all involved in an issue which has been pushed under the table on all levels of government for far too long, that being the care of our Veterans and their Families.

Some of you may be veterans and receive publications from the VFW, the American Legion, AMVETS, Catholic Vets, Jewish Vets, Forty & Eight...the list goes on. All of these publications pinpoint the confusion or lack of qualified resources available to our veterans of all wars and conflicts. Speaker after speaker today has amplified these growing concerns especially at a time when our economy is stretched beyond the limits and our numbers of traumatically injured veterans is exploding.

After having served in the Lehigh Valley in veterans affairs, as a service officer, a post adjutant and an elected official for over 50 years, I was asked by the County Executive to serve on their in-house committee which interviews and selects the best three candidates to fill the position of County Veterans Director. The County Executive selects one individual from these three with the other two for future consideration should the nominee is unable to serve for one reason or another. Of course, politics being politics, the Executive and Board of Commissioners are always striving to serve their electorate and nothing can be more devastating than veterans or their families exposing apparent lack of concern, service or even the mediocre application of benefits by their selected Veterans Director or his/her's staff.

I can justify the fact that most County Veterans Directors are sincere and do all they can to assist our veterans, working with the federally run hospitals and agencies. However, these Directors can't do it all and often become entangled in the bureaucratic web of intermingling agencies as well as diminishing staff levels due to shrinking budgets on the municipal level. General Sager brought out this alarming reality when he noted in these days the Adjutant General has enough to do in keeping their Guard ready for active service on many fronts...disasters here in America, terrorist threats on our soil, as well as maneuvers on the State, Federal and now International levels. Can we in good conscience expect his staff to bring forth all earned and required benefits for our deserving veterans and their families. In essence, here in Pennsylvania, the system is unable to deliver and could be compared to a good tasting frosting on a sad tasting cake.

In our County the longstanding unwritten requirement has been that the position of County Veterans Director be held by a Veteran, be it a male or female veteran and we have had both. Several years ago we were challenged by a staff member without military service vying for the Directorship but public outcry still demands military service to be part of the qualifications...especially since we now have so many veterans of employment age. While I am not opposed to unions in the private sector, across Pennsylvania we have several counties where this crucial position has become unionized and military service is not a prerequisite but rather seniority in County employment takes the forefront generally with salary advancement the goal rather than an inbred passion to help fellow veterans. Since unions in public employment are gaining in numbers on all levels of government the dedication associated with the position of future Veterans Directors is sure to be on a downward spiral. Can we allow yet one more horror story in the media attest to the failure to deliver veteran's benefits under our existing fractured system?

The very security of our Nation depends on improving the quality of veteran benefits. We need to be proactive and give increased importance to centralization and the ability to pinpoint crucial agency problems which at this time are fractured across 67 counties with an overburdened Adjutant General doing their best.

In this political year "change" is the victor and here on the State level we likewise need to steer ahead. That is why passage of this proposed legislation is crucial and I ask that you look beyond politics and friendships and look only to our deserving veterans.

Thank you for allowing me to address this distinguished group.

Sincerely,



Joseph R. Zeller
Retired Legislator, 134th District of Lehigh County
Veteran of WWII and the Korean War