Testimony of Paul F. Hastings
Chairman of the State Veterans' Commission
June 5, 2008

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee on Military & Veterans Facilities of the House Military and Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee, allow me to introduce myself to the committee members.

My name is Paul Hastings, a retired Marine with 22 years active service with the U. S. Marine Corps and Marine Corps Reserve, separated and retired in 1972 with a medical disability. I've been active with veterans' issues since 1972. I'm a past National Commandant of the Marine Corps League and was appointed to the state Veterans' Commission by the 41st Governor of Pennsylvania in 1984 as the Vietnam Veteran representative on the Commission. I've been reappointed by each of the subsequent Governors when my four-year term of office came up for reappointment.

My peer members of the Veterans' Commission elected me as their Chairman in 1991 and I have served in that capacity until present.

Although some may not think so, I believe we have accomplished a lot for the veterans of this Commonwealth over the past twenty-four years that I've served on the Commission. The Vice Chairman of the Commission will go into some detail on the accomplishments during his testimony.

Over the years, the veteran organizations have felt that a Separate Department of Veterans' Affairs would be beneficial for the veterans here in Pennsylvania, to mirror that of the federal government, when the feds elevated their position to a separate department of Veterans' Affairs. Frankly, since the PA legislature elevated the Deputy Adjutant General for Veterans' Affairs to the position of General Officer status, the veterans have had a major voice in the causes for veterans' issues here in PA, not only with The Adjutant General, but also with the Governor and Legislature.

We can certainly thank the Legislature for being very supportive of the Veterans and Military and especially the National Guard members of Pennsylvania. You have listened to our needs and desires and you have supported us. We owe a debt of gratitude to you for listening and acting when asked.

Just last year, we asked you to support our legislative effort to bring help and assistance to the veteran organizations by supporting their Service Officer programs. We are asking for your continued support to assist in expanding that program so that the veterans returning can obtain the rightful benefits that they are entitled to receive from the federal government. This program is just getting off the ground and I believe it will pay huge dividends to the Commonwealth.

As for the separate department issue, it is my opinion that we do not need to spend millions of dollars to create a new department at this time. The current arrangement is satisfactory and it has been satisfactory over many years. There seems to be a push by some who would think otherwise. In my opinion, those that have made their voices known to you really do not have the support of many of the veteran service organizations.

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Nothing reported in the Defense Solutions study would show a need for a separate department of Veterans Affairs. In fact, their study consisted of about two hours worth of review and contact with the member organizations of the Veterans' Commission. (Review final report of work group of Veterans' Commission of December 4, 2007 re the Defense Solutions recommendations. See separate report).

Regarding House Bill 344, it would appear that the bill was taken mostly from the Defense Solutions study. At least, many of the issues presented seem to come from that study. Some items in the bill are fatally flawed. Others are not even mentioned.

Bottom line, Ladies and Gentlemen, we do NOT need a separate department of Veteran Affairs at this time and the PA War Veterans Council told the Governor at the luncheon meeting with him in February 2008 that we would not pursue that effort if we could get funding and support for SB 915. Let us give Act 66 time to come to fruition. Let us use our resources to the benefit of our veterans now and not use them to attempt to dismantle something that IS working, in my opinion.

In closing, allow me to quote the last sentence of the last paragraph of the Executive Summary of the Defense Solutions study to the LB&FC: "In the absence of additional State funding, creating a new department will drain resources away from veterans' programs and could do more harm than good".

Thank you for allowing me to come before your subcommittee today. I will attempt to answer any questions.

Respectfully,

Paul F. Hastings

Paul F. Hastings,
Chairman, PA Veterans' Commission

Report of Work Group appointed by Chairman, PA Veterans' Commission

Pennsylvania Senate Resolutions 124 and 131 called on the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee (LB&FC) to assess Pennsylvania's veteran services and to determine the advantages and disadvantages of creating a separate cabinet-level Department of Veterans Affairs. The LB&FC contracted with Defense Solutions, LLC to conduct this study.

On October 3, 2007, the LB&FC released the report to the public. Copies of the report were made available to the Veteran Service Organizations on that date. The state Veterans' Commission met on October 5, 2007 for their regular monthly meeting and the Chairman of the Veterans' Commission commended the report to the members for consideration and further requested comments regarding the report at the next meeting to be held on November 2, 2007.

Subsequent to the October 5, 2007 Veterans' Commission meeting, the Chairman of the Veterans' Commission received a letter dated October 9, 2007 from the Executive Assistant of Defense Solutions addressed to Senator John Pippy, Chairman of the LB&FC, and requested that a copy of the letter be provided to the members of the Veterans' Commission, which was accomplished at the November 2, 2007 meeting of the Commission.

At the November 2, 2007 meeting of the Veterans' Commission the Chairman appointed a "work group" consisting of himself and several members of the Commission to review the Defense Solutions report in detail and make a report to the Veterans' Commission. The members of the "work group" included the Vice Chairman of the Commission; the Commanders of the AMVETS, Department of PA and Disabled American Veterans, Department of PA; the President, County Directors of Veterans Affairs Association; the Adjutants from The American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars and Disabled American Veterans, Department of PA; and the Executive Director, AMVETS, Department of PA. Other members of the commission were invited to attend the meetings of the "work group".

The designated "work group" met on November 14, 2007 and reviewed the Defense Solutions study in detail and specifically reviewed the **recapitulations of recommendations** made that were enumerated on page number 108 of the study report. The specific comments and recommendations of the "work group" as they pertain to the study recommendations are as follows. (A member of MOAA was also present at this meeting).

Study Recommendation 1: "This study recommends the creation of a separate, cabinet-level Department for Veterans Affairs from assets belonging to the current Bureau for Veterans Affairs within the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs."

Response by Work Group: After a detailed review of the study as presented, it is the opinion of the members of the work group that the study is non-conclusive and therefore it does not, by itself, prove a need for a separate Department of Veterans Affairs.

Study Recommendation 2: "It is recommended that the Department recognize and support, but have no control over, the following commissions, councils and boards. The State Veterans' Commission, The War Veterans' Council, The Advisory Council organized at each State operated veterans' center, The Trustee organization for Scotland School for Veterans' Children, other veterans' councils and commissions that may be formed from time to time."

Response by the Work Group: The members of the work group were not sure whether the recommendation was referring to the current Department of Military and Veterans' Affairs or the proposed new Department of Veterans' Affairs as recommended in the first recommendation. In either case, the work group did not consider the recommendation as applicable in view of the work group's response to the need for a new Department. The work group definitely does not concur in the recommendation if it is meant to apply to the current Department of Military and Veteran Affairs.

Study Recommendation 3: "The Department establish and enforce standards for appointment as a State and County Veterans' Service Officer and that the Department be assigned responsibility for all non-federal veterans' programs administered within the Commonwealth, to specifically include the management, oversight and funding of the Governor's Veterans Outreach and Assistance Centers and that the new Department, if created, review possible changes to the County Directors of Veterans Affairs provision of the County Code."

Response by the Work Group: This study has several recommendations within this total recommendation so the work group will address each part.

a. Regarding the "Department establish and enforce standards for appointments as State and County Veterans' Service Officers", the federal Department of Veterans Affairs provides rules and regulations regarding the appointment of "accredited" Nationally VA recognized Veteran Service Officers to handle claims with the U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs.
b. Regarding the "Department be assigned responsibility for all non-federal veterans' programs administered within the Commonwealth", the Department currently oversees and coordinates such programs within the Commonwealth as currently comes within their purview. This would require the Department of Labor and Industry and the Department of Education and other Departments to give up their responsibilities to administer programs specifically within their purview and is not feasible and appropriate in the opinion of the members of the work group.
c. Regarding the "oversight and funding of the Governor's Veterans Outreach and Assistance Centers", the work group believes this program should be reviewed in detail as to whether they should be continued as is or modified as to their continued purpose since it would appear that the GVOAC's are not performing the duties as they were originally intended to perform when first established years ago.
d. Regarding the "review of possible changes to the County Directors of Veterans Affairs provision of the County Code", the work group concurs that the provisions of the County Code should be reviewed as they pertain to the County Directors of Veterans Affairs.

Study Recommendation 4: "Retain the Scotland School for Veterans' Children and restore its facilities to good working order."

Response by the Work Group: The members of the work group whole heartedly concur in the recommendation that Scotland School for Veterans' Children be retained. The facilities at the school absolutely need restoration and/or replacement in some cases.

Study Recommendation 5: "Co-locate the new department with the Scotland School for Veterans' Children."

Response by the Work Group: Not applicable in view of response to recommendation #1.

Study Recommendation 6: " Should a Department for Veterans Affairs be created, it is recommended that appeals for denial of benefits under the department's many programs be addressed to the Secretary of the Department rather than to the Adjutant General as current law provides."

Response by the Work Group: Not applicable in view of response to recommendation #1.

Study Recommendation 7: "Educational Gratuity Program: Raise the monthly benefit to not less than $750 per semester or term."

Response by Work Group: The members of the work group must point out that the benefit is not a "monthly" benefit per semester or term as stated in the study recommendation, it is a gratuity per semester or term only. The work group believes that the benefit for educational gratuity to the children of 100% disabled veterans should be increased to $1000 from the current $500 per semester or term regardless of financial need of the student and that the current law be modified accordingly.

Study Recommendation #8 and #9: "Blind Veterans' Pension and Paralyzed Veterans' Pension: Raise the monthly benefit to not less than $200 per month."

Response by the Work Group: The members of the work group concur in the study recommendations regarding the Blind and Paralyzed Veterans' pensions. In addition, the work group believes the law should provide for annual or bi-annual cost of living increases.

Study Recommendation #10: "State Veterans' Commission: Change Title 51 Pa.C.S to permit service on the State Veterans' Commission to any honorable discharged veteran."

Response by the Work Group: The members of the work group do not concur with the study recommendation regarding permitting service on the Veterans' Commission to "any" honorable discharged veteran. We believe that service on the Veterans' Commission is appropriate as now listed in the current law, with possibly two minor modifications. The first would be to remove the representative of WWI veterans and the second would be to allow voting for the current non-voting Adjutants of The American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Executive Director of AMVETS. Further, the Governor currently has the authority to appoint "any" honorable discharged veteran to the four member-at-large slots as appropriate.

Study Recommendation #11: "War Veterans' Council: Permit service on the War Veterans' Council to any honorably discharged veteran."

Response by the Work Group: The members of the work group do not concur with this recommendation since the Pennsylvania War Veterans Council has its own bylaws and membership rules and regulations as a separate Association of Veterans organizations and not controlled by the

state legislature. As an aside, the Defense Solutions study group met with members of the PA War Veterans Council for less than an hour to discuss veteran issues with the member representatives of the organizations of the War Veterans Council.

Study Recommendation #12: "Governor's Outreach Assistance Center: Transfer the GVOAC to a new Veterans Affairs Department, if created, or immediately implement the 24 year old agreement with the DMVA."

Response by the Work Group: Please see the response under recommendation number 3 above, sub-paragraph c. Technically, there are not seven GVOAC's as stated in the study. There are only five centers under the original program, although seven are currently funded as stated in the study.

Conclusions.

The work group hereby submits the report to the Veterans' Commission at the December 2008 meeting for their review and appropriate action. However, the work group **strongly recommends** that the comments of the work group be made available to the members of the Senate and House of Representatives due to the pending legislation to pursue a separate Department of Veterans Affairs.

As the members of the PA War Veterans' Council stated at the luncheon meeting with the Governor in May 2007, "they would not pursue a separate Department of Veterans' Affairs if adequate funding were provided to support efforts to expand the Veteran Service Organization's service officer programs."

Members of the "work group" at the final meeting held on December 4, 2008 at 10:00 A.M. concurred unanimously to recommend the above report to the Veterans' Commission. The members present at the meeting include the following:

Robert Miller, Department Commander, The American Legion
John Getz, Department Commander, Veterans of Foreign Wars
Lawrence Kelly, Department Commander, Disabled American Veterans
George Mullen, Department Adjutant, Veterans of Foreign Wars
Kit Watson, Department Adjutant, The American Legion
Tim Dunn, Department Adjutant, Disabled American Veterans
Thomas Minchin, Department Executive Director, AMVETS
Carmen DiSanti, Department Service Officer, Veterans of Foreign Wars
David Sandman, Director of Communications, Veterans of Foreign Wars, DOP
Paul Hastings, Chairman, Pennsylvania Veterans' Commission

Cornelius Appleby, Vice Chairman, Pennsylvania Veterans' Commission was out of town for this meeting, but called and concurred in the recommendations of the "work group".