

Mr. Chairman, distinguished committee members I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today. I am saddened, disappointed, and a little embarrassed that we are here discussing expending more Commonwealth funds to create a separate department of veterans affairs when the ink is barely dry on SB-915 or act 66. Is it just me or does it appear we are assuming this service officers initiative is expected to fail thus strengthening the argument for a separate department? Surely as the passage of SB-915, which passed unanimously in both the House and the Senate, our VSO's would be afforded the opportunity to show how we can improve service to our veteran's population. It is imperative to remember one fact that helped gain wide support for SB-915 was from the VA figure, a snapshot in time of what the four big VSO's brought into our veterans hands, federal dollars to the tune of \$58,000,000 in March 2007. Also it must be noted that most of our clients are NOT members nor do we make it a requirement for them to become members! And I must add that these services were accomplished without any outside funding! The concept that a separate department will speak for all veterans and increase the monetary awards from the federal government is just plain wrong. Most VSO's are capable and willing to be our veteran's population advocates! These wanna be in charge guys have not the stage to further their cause so I am surmising they are looking to a separate department to give them the voice they want to have. The cost of this separate department would be much more effectively spent further increasing and expanding our service officers work!

True fact, there are more PA veterans currently receiving compensation, (107,403 veterans or 10.16 %) which is more than at anytime in our history. There are also 17,058 new claims filed that are pending approval.

We believe TAG is doing an admirable job managing the various aspects of her position. Remember, we are in a period of WAR at this time! Her track record is pro-veteran and compared with other administrations, including some you heard from earlier, she has an excellent record of service to our veterans and their causes! The staff at FITG is always very helpful. The six veterans home are immaculate and well managed. They do a great service to our veteran's population and our Commonwealth's tax money!

Why didn't General Sager make this recommendation when he served as TAG?

HB-344, though lengthy in content, seems it was hastily put together and it does not remotely address the Veterans Memorial Trust Fund? It also calls for the formation of a veteran's advisory group. To my knowledge no VSO was consulted in this bill. The American Legion has 238,000 members across our state and 830 American Legion Posts across our Commonwealth. The other VSO's also have memberships from every community, yet they were not asked for input. If the concept of a separate Department is a better mouse trap it should be easy to sell. It's simply not the case!

The PWVC is an established group of VSO's who all have voices and votes on issues of our veterans population and in dealing independently with the Adjutant General. The PWVC does not receive outside funding and meets regularly to discuss legislative issues as well as veteran's issues. What, pray tell, is the PWVC's roll? This seems to be a slap in the face of all VSO's including our fellow VFW members. The small group Lehigh Valley Military Advisory Council (LVMAC) is once again trying to circumvent the long history of the Pennsylvania VSO's. What motive do they have? Power? Control? Being able to bypass the established veteran's community? Who do they speak for and represent? Far less than you have been led to believe!

As a veterans advocate or voice the separate department would, in our opinion, politically become the same as the Secretary of VA on the Presidents Cabinet, nothing more than the administrations mouth piece! The VSO's, through the PWVC and the PSVC, are the best advocates for our veterans population, not a self serving small group who are looking to control and be compensated as well.

It also appears to me the separate study by Defense Solutions was not a true and accurate picture of the state of veteran affairs in Pennsylvania. The fact that the contracted study company was conducted by someone who was a candidate for TAG position should not have happened. The length of time spent copying and pasting in this report would have been

better spent doing real interviews and meeting with the veteran's community and VSO's. They spent a total of 38 minutes talking to all VSO's at the same time.

If you look back in our history you would see there was a push in 1991 to form a separate department, it was not necessary then and it is not necessary now.

Our leadership has been actively recruited to support a separate department. The American Legion has overwhelmingly reject a resolution supporting a separate Department of Veterans affairs, the primary reason for this position -- NO ONE has presented a true case showing how a separate department will be good for our veterans population! I contend that still holds true today! Is there more we can accomplish? Absolutely, but bang for your dollar is not well spent on creating a duplication of services and another layer of bureaucracy!

The American Legion stands at the ready to work with you, the other VSO's and the veterans of Pennsylvania on all veterans' issues. We all agree we need to do what is right for our veteran's population; this distraction of a separate department is not in the best interest of our veterans!