

COUNTY VETERANS AFFAIRS DIRECTORS

Good morning ... I would like to begin by thanking you for inviting me here today to your annual conference.

It is indeed both an honor and a privilege to be with a group such as yours ... a group which on a daily basis ... is committed to serving the needs of all veterans.

(PAUSE)

As the Majority Chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, I, too, have a great interest in all the issues which affect veterans. My role as committee chairman is that of a "day-to-day" manager -- a manager who is tasked with assuring the veteran community that the legislature remains committed to the needs of our Commonwealth veterans.

Now, in order to obtain a true feel for the veterans' needs ... I have come to learn that those needs are best presented by individuals like you ... through forums such as this, today.

Therefore ... I think the real importance of my attendance here today is twofold ... first I would like to introduce myself to your organization's membership ... and to allow us to become familiar with one another as we ... together ... work toward addressing the needs of our veteran community.

Now, I do personally know a few county directors here today ... but I welcome the chance to meet each one of you. So ... please feel free to personally introduce yourself when time permits. Or, please feel free to contact my office in Harrisburg. My door is always open, and I would welcome the opportunity to assist you whenever possible.

The second role of my participation here today ... is to present you with a brief legislative update ... an update which I know that you ... as county veterans affairs directors ... are most interested in.

As county directors, you are indeed on the front lines when veterans have problems or concerns that need to be addressed. It is

often your phone line that lights up ... or your waiting room that becomes filled.

Thus ... I would think it is important that your organization remain ... as it always has in the past ... “ahead of the curve” in regard to recent changes in laws which affect veterans.

(PAUSE)

At the present time, the legislature is engaged in summer recess, and will not be formally meeting as a deliberative body until September 27th.

Nonetheless, this summer break provides the House and Senate Committees with time to thoroughly evaluate important issues ... and formulate a legislative agenda for the fall. As well, it provides Senator Robbins and me the opportunity to meet with organizations such as this ... and surmise what laws may need to be amended to help your organization with its important mission of assisting veterans.

(PAUSE)

In terms of recent changes in the law, I would be remiss if I did not first mention the legislature's budget appropriation of \$2 million for the completion of the Pennsylvania Veterans Memorial to be located as Ft. Indiantown Gap National Cemetery. For 12 years, the veteran community has done a tremendous job of raising funds for this long-overdue tribute to all veterans of this Commonwealth. Thus ... it only seemed appropriate for the legislature to finalize this funding need ... so that this memorial can be constructed by Veterans Day, 2000.

As well, along the same lines as the memorial issue, the legislature recently passed HB 314.

- This bill received final passage last week ... at about 2:00 a.m. on the last day of session. Due to the amendment process ... in the late hours of the evening ... which then became the early hours of the morning ... this bill became an omnibus piece of veterans legislation.**

First, HB 314 established the Keystone Paralyzed Veterans Association as a voting member of the State Veterans Commission.

Secondly, this legislation extended the Pennsylvania Veterans Memorial Commission to June 30, 2003.

This was an important amendment, due to the fact that the Memorial Commission ... which just received \$2 million from the legislature ... was due to Sunset out of existence on June 30 of this month. Without the extension ... the Memorial Commission would not have had the authority to move forward with the construction phase of the Veterans Memorial.

Another important piece of enacted legislation was Senate Bill 813, which was prime-sponsored by Senator Robbins. This legislation increased the Blind and Paralyzed Veterans Pension Programs, administered by the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs ... from \$100 to \$150 per month.

Another piece of legislation which recently passed was House Bill 10. This was a Title 75 Vehicle Code bill which addressed the issue of junior licenses for our young drivers in the Commonwealth.

An amendment, by Senator Piccola ... assisted by Senator Robbins ... was inserted into the bill. The amendment addressed an issue which was brought to our attention by your organization in the past. In particular, Tom Wasco ... your state liaison, approached several key legislators on this issue.

The issue involved DUI offenders who are also veterans ... and the issue dealt with the fact that the state did not recognize VA alcohol treatment programs ... in regard to being an eligible court-prescribed treatment. Thus ... many VA-eligible veterans were forced to pay, out of their own pockets, for a treatment program which was already made available to them due to their veterans status.

This legislation, which is now on the Governor's desk for his signature, would allow the VA alcohol treatment program to be an

acceptable program under our state's court-mandated treatment program.

Overall, your organization's intervention on this issue was indeed crucial, in terms of amending a section of the law which adversely affected a portion of our veteran community. Your efforts should be applauded, and I would like to thank you for your past support ... I look forward to your continued support in the future.

In closing, I again would like to thank you for allowing me to meet your membership ... and offer my brief remarks. As well, I must apologize for not being able to attend your dinner tonight. I have another pressing engagement ... But, nonetheless, it is indeed a pleasure to spend this time here today with you.

Thank you for extending this courtesy to me, today.

ROL/smg