

Rep. Paul Semmel  
Speech, Sheffield VFW  
Nov. 13, 2004

**Thanks, Dick, for that kind introduction. It's always a pleasure to share in a Veterans Day observance with members of a local VFW.**

**So, when Dick requested that I present Certificates of Appreciation to your membership, I was happy to accept.**

**In fact, I find sharing in meals and events with our veterans is one of the best perks of serving as chairman of the Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee.**

**That's also a good segue to the topic of my discussion tonight – a highlight of some issues the committee is considering that have significant relevance to our veterans community.**

**The committee has legislative oversight for the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMVA) and the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency (PEMA).**

**Additionally, reflecting increased responsibilities, the committee was restructured to include two new subcommittees – the Subcommittee on Military and Veterans Facilities and the Security and Emergency Response Readiness Subcommittee.**

**I'm proud our committee has been one of the most productive House standing committees – working to strengthen Pennsylvania's laws and programs to help our veterans; our active military reservists and National Guard members; and our first-responders.**

**Sept. 11 was a real wake-up call to determine how our state emergency services would fair in responding to any future terrorist threats and what the Legislature should do to further the Commonwealth's homeland security efforts.**

**The full-scale activation of so many of our National Guard and reserve units has uncovered numerous of problems and issues that need to be addressed by the Legislature.**

**No doubt some of the non-retired veterans here tonight are coping with a reduced work force as employees and coworkers are activated and sent to Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo and other trouble spots.**

**And, of course, many of you may already have family members serving in the Gulf or Kosovo. As veterans, all of you know the many problems military families face when a spouse, or son or daughter is sent overseas.**

**...Problems such as reduced incomes, increased expenses and additional parenting responsibilities, not to mention the many emotional stresses involved.**

**In response, the Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee has played a significant role in developing several bills in the Homeland Security package, and addressing serious needs facing our military personnel, firefighters, and emergency responders.**

### **Providing for Our Protectors**

**Pennsylvania has deployed the largest contingent of the National Guard to Iraq, Afghanistan and Kosovo. They serve as our protectors in the war zones and hot spots around the globe.**

**Since our world has changed and placed increased burdens on our heroes and their families, we've seen where current**

**laws need updates to best serve the needs of those who are protecting us.**

**With four bills the House has passed and sent to the Senate, we're taking action to help with real life issues that affect thousands of Pennsylvania families. They focus on clearing obstacles that inflict needless hassle on our heroes and their families.**

**The first bill corrects a glaring absence in Pennsylvania law. Currently, reservists who defend our country on the front lines are not eligible to receive the same benefits as enlisted members upon their return home.**

**Why? The state law cannot technically recognize reservists who serve in combat zones as "veterans" under Pennsylvania's Veterans Preference law.**

**House Bill 2055 will change the language and ensure reservists who serve in combat are given the same honor and state benefits bestowed on their “full-time soldier” comrades. These heroes and their families deserve equal treatment under the law.**

**House Bill 2081 addresses the aggravation and financial losses imposed on servicemen who are reassigned or called to active duty and are trapped in leases.**

**Since service men and women and National Guard members and their families are especially prone to frequent moves, the “lease trap” situation comes up regularly for those simply answering the call to serve.**

**This bill brings Pennsylvania in line with new federal requirements and even goes a few steps further in ensuring fair treatment for our servicemen and women.**

**The third bill amends Pennsylvania's present Firefighter, Ambulance Service, Rescue Squad, Law Enforcement or National Guard Line of Duty Death Benefits Act.**

**This law is ambiguous on heart attacks and strokes that occur "after" an emergency or training incident. House Bill 2285 provides for state death benefits for those who die after suffering a heart attack or stroke within 24 hours of a physical training exercise or emergency response.**

**Unfortunately, many Pennsylvania families have suffered the terrible circumstance of a loved one dying shortly after responding to an emergency, or following more rigorous training missions. The trauma was doubled by the denial of certain benefits.**

**The fourth bill ensures that reservists who are called to active duty suffer no ramifications in auto insurance coverage if they need to suspend their policy.**

**With this legislation, insurance companies will be prohibited from canceling, imposing surcharges or removing premium discounts on policies of active duty reservists. House Bill 2348 will address a nagging problem that no serviceman or woman should have to face.**

**Committee also responds to the needs of Pennsylvania's veterans...**

**As you may know, since 1988 the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) has operated a much-needed and well-established system for transporting Pennsylvania veterans between the eight VA medical centers located throughout the Commonwealth and their homes or designated pick-up and drop-off locations.**



**Quite possibly some of your members have used this free service. In any case, many of those who use the program are seeking care for service-connected disabilities, while nearly all others have very limited incomes and no other health care resources.**

**That's why I'm pleased to report that for the fourth time we were able to secure a \$250,000 line-item appropriation for the DAV Transportation Network. Last year's appropriation enabled the organization to purchase 13 new vans with the funds.**

**An initial \$250,000 in the 2001-02 state budget enabled the DAV to purchase 10 vans. The second \$250,000 appropriation resulted in 12 new vans.**

**The third allocation brings the number of vans added to the fleet to 35. This fourth appropriation will allow the DAV to expand the program even further.**

**Another issue that I'm sure you will agree the Legislature needs to address is updating the provisions of both our bingo and small games of chance laws for all Pennsylvania nonprofit organizations, including veterans' organizations, volunteer emergency responders, church groups, and fraternal clubs.**

**I am fully aware of the fundraising challenges that veterans service organizations and volunteer fire and EMS departments are faced with.**

**That's why I worked with the Allied Charities of Pennsylvania Organization on two bills which are an attempt to modernize the provisions of both laws.**

**House Bills 2410 and 2411 would eliminate the \$5,000 per seven-day period payout limit on small games of chance; allow for progressive games of chance; increase top tier payouts; allow for one mega Bingo per month; create insured games; eliminate antiquated advertisement restrictions; and allow more than one small games of chance license per building.**

**Additionally, the bills would require that winning tickets be treated in accordance with IRS regulations for reporting purposes...\$600 and above would be required to be recorded, and \$1,200 and above reported to the IRS.**

**As you will agree, many of the current limitations provide inadequate flexibility and have hampered efforts to fund charitable causes. Rather than taking a piecemeal approach, I am proposing a comprehensive overhaul.**

**Across the Commonwealth organizations from veterans clubs to churches to humane societies and fire companies use Bingo and Small Games of Chance to raise money for charitable purposes in their communities.**

**While I have no reliable independent index to cite, it is safe to say, with more than 20,000 licenses in Pennsylvania, these groups pour in excess of hundreds of millions of dollars into their communities each year.**

**With the decades-old limitations currently in place these groups are finding it increasingly difficult to meet the needs of their communities.**

**My proposal should not cost the Commonwealth anything in dollars while ensuring that the flow of good works by these organizations continues.**

## **Civil Air Patrol gets increased funding...**

**I'm also pleased to report that the committee was able to secure more state funds to help the Pennsylvania Civil Air Patrol (CAP) promote its very worthwhile Youth Cadet Program.**

**Earlier this year the Pennsylvania wing of the Civil Air Patrol held its' annual "Capital Days" to highlight its many services and activities, including the CAP Youth Cadet Program.**

**Perhaps you know of a youngster who participated in the event? The organization initially won fame for its role in defense of the United States, especially its coastal patrol and border surveillance operations during World War II.**

**Today, the CAP, a civilian auxiliary of the United States Air Force, continues to prepare its members to be able to respond on very short notice to any national emergency.**

**The Civil Air Patrol's cadet program, one of the top programs in the nation, teaches young men and women about the importance of serving their community and instills within them a sense of civic duty. It's a proven program that is developing Pennsylvania's future leaders.**

**These young people are trained to be leaders to carry out humanitarian or other emergency service missions, including search and rescue work.**

**Recognizing the need for a strong Civil Air Patrol, the Legislature included \$450,000 in the 2004-05 budget for the organization, which is a significant increase over last year's appropriation. \$50,000 of the money is earmarked for the Youth Cadet Program.**

**Committee recognizes needs facing our first responders...**

**I'm sure you all agree that our firefighters and emergency responders need financial help so they can spend a little less time fundraising and a little more time training and responding to emergencies.**

**That's why we enacted legislation in 2003 establishing the Volunteer Fire Company and Volunteer Ambulance Service Grant Program.**

**Under the act, grants provided financial assistance to these organizations for the construction or renovation of their buildings; purchase or repair of firefighting, ambulance or rescue equipment and support services; training; or debt reduction. However, this initial act provided for only a one-year grant program.**

**Realizing that our 2,500 volunteer emergency responder organizations throughout the Commonwealth really need legislative support now more than ever, I spearheaded negotiations to get Act 80 through the legislative process and signed by governor.**

**This act reestablished the Volunteer Fire Company and the Volunteer Ambulance Service Grant Act. This law again provides grants to improve and enhance the capabilities of volunteer fire companies and ambulance services across the Commonwealth.**

**We also led the effort to get the necessary money included in the 2004-05 budget to fully fund the grant program.**



**Also, further financial support is now available through a more financially secure Volunteer Loan Assistance Program (VLAP), which provides low-interest loans to Pennsylvania's volunteer fire and emergency response departments.**

**Act 5 of 2004 – legislation I prime sponsored – shores up this valuable program by doubling the bond debt level and making more funds available to our volunteer organizations.**

**In order to better equip our first responders with the tools and resources they need to effectively do their jobs, we must improve our 911 emergency communications system.**

**Act 56 of 2003 – legislation I also introduced – allows county 911 centers to track and pinpoint the location of emergencies through cellular telephones.**

**This E-911 measure will help cut down on the response time to emergencies, and we hope it will save many lives.**

**The act also creates a reverse 911 system, allowing 911 call centers to notify individuals in the event of an emergency in the community.**

**Just as important as financial assistance and up-to-date technology is the need for training. It helps our dedicated first responders do their jobs even better. House Bill 780 amends the Hazardous Material Emergency Planning and Response Act to include specific requirements for training and equipment necessary to respond to biological or chemical emergencies that are a result of terrorist activities. The bill is in the Senate for consideration.**

## **Homeland Security Gets Committee Attention...**

**Another bill approved by the House and awaiting Senate action goes to the heart of preparing Pennsylvania for unforeseen future acts of terrorism by creating the Pennsylvania Office of Homeland Security and elevating the position of Homeland Security Director to a cabinet level position.**

**This new office will be the state's direct link to the federal government in securing federal homeland security money.**

**Knowing that every Pennsylvanian is concerned about our preparedness for any future terrorist activities, the committee is investigating all aspects of homeland security across Pennsylvania.**

**Hearings have been conducted on bio-terrorism, mass casualty care preparedness, international transportation and port security, agri-terrorism, cyber-terrorism, the security of our water systems and utilities, and the security of our transportation systems.**

**A comprehensive report will be issued by the end of November outlining what the Commonwealth needs to do to enhance security, as well as ways to make the best use of federal Homeland Security dollars that are being funneled to the state.**

**The first priority of the new 2005-06 legislative session will be to draft and enact legislation following the suggestions contained in the report.**

**Now, I'll try to answer questions about any of these specific programs or issues. And, I again thank you for inviting me to share in your program this evening. # # #**