
Public Hearing

before

ASSEMBLY MILITARY AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

ASSEMBLY CONCURRENT RESOLUTION No. 96

*(Proposes constitutional amendment to permit disabled veterans
who served in U.S. Armed Forces at any time to receive civil service preference)*

LOCATION: Committee Room 13
State House Annex
Trenton, New Jersey

DATE: May 21, 2007
10:00 a.m.

MEMBERS OF COMMITTEE PRESENT:

Assemblyman Jack Conners, Chair
Assemblywoman Nilsa Cruz-Perez, Vice Chair
Assemblyman Mims Hackett Jr.
Assemblyman Larry Chatzidakis
Assemblyman John E. Rooney



ALSO PRESENT:

Tracey F. Pino Murphy
Office of Legislative Services
Committee Aide

R. Thurman Barnes
Assembly Majority
Committee Aide

Brigid E. Farrell
Assembly Republican
Committee Aide

Hearing Recorded and Transcribed by
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ASSEMBLYMAN JACK CONNERS (Chair): Ladies and gentlemen, would everyone please stand.

(participants recite Pledge of Allegiance)

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: Thank you.

Ladies and gentlemen, as a way of getting started, I thought what we would do is have the Assembly Concurrent Resolution read -- have the statement read so we all know why we're here.

Tracey.

MS. PINO MURPHY: ACR 96: This Concurrent Resolution proposes a constitutional amendment to permit certain disabled veterans to receive Civil Service preference. Currently, only disabled veterans who served in the United States armed forces during the time of war may receive Civil Service hiring preference. This amendment would permit all disabled veterans, including those who did not serve during the time of war, to also receive such preference. To qualify, the veterans must have become disabled while performing active service in the military. War-time service would still be required for veterans who are not disabled.

The Committee favorably reported this bill out of Committee on March 9, 2006.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: Ladies and gentlemen, just as a way of getting started, number one, thank you so much for everyone that is here today.

I guess, for years now, I've been on -- served on the Military Veterans' Affairs Committee going on 10 years now. And I guess I'm in my sixth year as chairing this Committee. And over the years, this subject continues to come up about: Why don't we have-- Or, you've heard of the

“vet is a vet” bill, where the State of New Jersey acknowledges and recognizes every veteran as a veteran. And we’ve been limited over the years to very specific dates; and if you all get a copy of the New Jersey Veterans Guide that the Department of Military and Veterans’ Affairs provides, it’s got a comprehensive list of all the dates that apply. And the reality, I think, is that one of the hang-ups has been, where would the money come from, in particular the tax credit. But as a result of all this, and over the years, and as a result of a lot of meetings that I’ve had with some of you that are sitting in the audience here -- and whether you’re DAV, or you’re Veterans of Foreign Wars, or you’re American Legion -- we have tried to do something. And after many of the conversations. And at the risk of embarrassing Sam Podietz, who is sitting back there, I can remember Sam actually sitting in my office a number of years ago talking about why doesn’t the State of New Jersey do what the Federal Government does -- five points on the Civil Service Exam and 10 points if you’re a disabled veteran.

So as time has marched on -- and giving great thought to that with all of you -- we came up with legislation that basically will do that in the State of New Jersey. But unbeknown to me -- and I think it was Tracey Pino that brought it to my attention -- she said that “Assemblyman, this is obviously a good thing. This is a good legislation. There is a problem, and the problem is that to give a disabled veteran 10 points on the exam, that the Constitution says that they had to be wounded in combat.” Had to be wounded in combat.

So what we’re attempting to do now, with this Assembly Concurrent Resolution, is change that. And then going forward, as we

move-- We have to have this on the ballot in November. We have to have the citizens say that this is the right thing to do -- and it is the right thing to do, at least in my opinion -- have it voted on and change the Constitution in the State of New Jersey. And then we can move forward with this legislation that would recognize all men and women that have put a uniform on and give them the opportunity -- give them a leg up. Certainly getting five points on an exam or 10 points on an exam isn't a guarantee that you're going to get the job, but it would be a help. It's what the Federal Government does. So I think this is really a good thing to do.

What we're going to do now, as we go forward with this -- and this is a public hearing, and is also one of the requirements to get this on the ballot -- is we're going to have testimony from some of you that are in the audience. And what I'd like to begin with is Colonel--

Excuse me?

ASSEMBLYMAN CHATZIDAKIS: Yes. Mr. Chairman, not to interrupt. But unfortunately, our -- Assemblyman Rooney and I -- committees were changed and we have a concurrent Committee going on right now. And I do have a bill up. So I just wanted to make a couple of comments, if I could? I'm very--

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: Oh, please, please. Assemblyman Chatzidakis, please.

ASSEMBLYMAN CHATZIDAKIS: In the wisdom of Trenton, obviously -- and no disrespect for not being here for the public hearing. But clearly, this is a subject, as the Chairman mentioned, that has been around for a long time. I wholeheartedly support this process to give our disabled vets, at the very minimum, their due. And I would expect that this is a

voter referendum probably we should be 100 percent for. Probably unprecedented -- nobody's ever, probably, voted 100 percent for anything. But this is one thing, I think, that definitely deserves 100 percent of the public's support to -- at least we can do for our veterans, especially our disabled veterans, who gave so much for us to have an opportunity to live in our society.

So regretfully, I must leave for another meeting, but this-- Hopefully, we'll all vote for this in November, and move on again.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: That's good.

Assemblyman Rooney, did you want--

ASSEMBLYMAN ROONEY: Yes, I have the same problem. We're on the same Committee -- the Environment Committee is meeting, and we also have a couple of items up for a public hearing. There will be votes taken in that Committee, so obviously we have to be there.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: Okay.

ASSEMBLYMAN ROONEY: I want to say that if you want to look for the actual dates, just take out your American Legion or your VFW membership card -- on the back of it are all the dates that apply. I am a cosponsor of this particular bill, and I certainly believe in it. I've always believed in it on the local level. In fact, when I was Mayor in Northvale, we interviewed people for police -- that was probably the biggest employment opportunity that there was in the town. I would always give personal preference to anyone who was a veteran, because that meant there was a commitment out there -- it was a commitment made by the person, to go into the service to serve their country, especially in this day and age where it's a volunteer service.

When I went in -- I actually got drafted the day after I arrived at Lackland Air Force Base for my basic training in the Air Force. So I had both sides of that. But I came through the draft period, and hopefully we won't have to do that again. But with the volunteer Army, Air Force, Navy, or Marines, I believe that we definitely owe these young people some benefit when they come back, when they're trying to get their lives back together again. They should have that consideration. They certainly deserve it, because they are the pride of this nation. And I want to thank them for what they've done.

And all of you out there (indicating audience), I want to thank you for what you've done and bring you all to our attention.

So, regretfully, Larry and I have to go to that next Committee meeting.

ASSEMBLYMAN CHATZIDAKIS: Well, hopefully we can come back.

ASSEMBLYMAN ROONEY: Yes.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: Come back, come back, whenever.

ASSEMBLYMAN ROONEY: I've looked at the agenda. I doubt it, but--

ASSEMBLYMAN CHATZIDAKIS: We'll try.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: And just as a footnote to what Assemblymen Rooney and Chatzidakis said, the wonderful thing about this Committee -- and I must -- you know, over the past 10 years, and even now, the tremendous cooperation by both sides of the aisle. And I hope everybody feels the same way -- that this has never been a Democrat or

Republican thing. This is about honoring our soldiers and doing the right thing. And whether it's our militia or National Guard, or it's veterans, this Committee is all about doing the right thing.

So thank you. And maybe it will end early. Then you could--

ASSEMBLYMAN ROONEY: We'll try.

ASSEMBLYMAN CHATZIDAKIS: Thank you very much for the indulgence, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for everything.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN ROONEY: From your mouth to our other Chairman's ears, to get this over with. (laughter) But I think he does have a flight to catch, so that's why we have his meeting today. So--

Thank you, again.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: The Vice Chair, Assemblywoman Nilsa Cruz-Perez, has joined us, because-- We have Assemblyman Mims Hackett.

What we'll do is, we'll move forward, and the first person testifying is Colonel Steve Abel, who -- probably just about everyone sitting out there knows who Colonel Abel is. So, Steve, without any further ado, go ahead.

C O L O N E L S T E P H E N G. A B E L: Mr. Chairman, Committee members, thank you for the opportunity to speak on this issue today, and thank you for all that you do for veterans in New Jersey. You're clearly ahead of the curve on that.

The Department of Military and Veterans Affairs supports the amendment that is being proposed, as do I personally. A member of the U.S. Military, disabled in the service of our nation, whether that is in

combat or not, should be considered a disabled veteran and receive Civil Service preference.

And I am taken back to a personal experience that I would like to share with you from my Lieutenant days in the Army -- you know, 30-plus years ago. It was my first tour in Korea. It was a nightmare range. We were still in the midst of the Cold War. The North Koreans were as menacing as ever. And so our training was as realistic as we could make it. And the infantry and the armor would literally maneuver into a live-fire artillery range. And the artillery would fire *danger close* -- that is within 200 meters of our tanks and our armored personnel carriers. At a point during one of those training events, the event was stopped. And normally what would happen, because you were in an actual artillery range, was the tank commander would pop up out of his hatch and then you would back your vehicle out of the range, over the tracks that you made coming into the range, to make sure at that point you didn't hit any live explosives.

On one such day, someone from behind the lead tank shot the tank commander of the vehicle in front of him, and he was paralyzed for life. That veteran, in New Jersey, would not be considered a veteran and would not be entitled to Civil Service preference. And I believe that is a mistake. A soldier, sailor, airman, marine, coast guardsman who is disabled in the service of their country needs to be recognized as a veteran and that disability needs to be recognized.

Now, I don't want to mislead the Committee. Not all of our noncombat servicemen receive bullet wounds in training. Some of them have more mundane injuries -- motor pool accidents, traffic accidents, and the like. But when you raise your hand and you swear to defend the

United States and the Constitution, there aren't any caveats to that oath of office. And so I think here in New Jersey we ought to fix the Constitution. It was written a long time ago, and we need to get this on the ballot, and hopefully the citizens of New Jersey will make the change.

Sir, that completes my statement, unless you have any questions, or the other Committee members do.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: Any questions?

ASSEMBLYMAN HACKETT: It's really not a question, but thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I know, as indicated, Steve -- Airman Colonel -- I would just like to thank you for coming to testify, as well as everyone else. And I'm just wondering, in my own infinite wisdom -- hopefully I'll pose it as such-- You know, I had my uncle in the Korean War; and also another uncle in the Air Force -- was in the Army and then was in the Air Force. And I'm just wondering-- And one was disabled in combat; and the other, he wasn't disabled at all. But just the idea of hearing you speak this morning, I'm just wondering why it took so long; and I'm just so happy I'm a member of change and the way things seem to be now.

And hopefully, once we get it on the ballot with the Committee's support, as well as our Chairman, who has actually been at the forefront all these years that I've known him -- I've been here approximately six years. And just the idea of seeing him in his tenaciousness, and watching you and he being supportive of all of our efforts at this point -- and at some point, we have to carry out the mandate and do what's right. And just the idea of waiting -- I'm of the opinion: Why should we wait in a case like this, inasmuch as it's being liberated throughout the minds of all of

us? And we definitely have to give our young people and also our veterans an opportunity to get their just due. And I'm just thanking you, and the Committee. This is a great hearing. And before I even hear the others, we are in support, and there's not much more we could say at this point, other than thank you all.

COLONEL ABEL: Well, thank you, sir.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: Steve, once again, thank you. Thank you so much for coming today. And you and I have had -- we've had many conversations about this subject. And once again, I think what you do -- or I see you so often and I hear you so often, and I think everyone does, that in addition to General Rieth, you have become the face of the DMAVA, and we count on you. And I think everyone in this room looks up to you and respects you. And I think when you come here today and you testify, it's important, and it just goes to show how important this resolution is. So thank you for coming today.

COLONEL ABEL: You're welcome, sir.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: Thank you.

Next is Carmen Peralta and Sam Podietz.

There's a button on the mike that will light red. And please speak up, too. I know there's someone in the room who is hearing impaired a little bit, and it would be helpful if everyone speaks up.

Carmen, thank you for being here; and Sam Podietz, thank you for being here today.

C A R M E N P E R A L T A: Thank you for having me.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: Please go ahead.

SAMUEL PODIETZ: Good morning, Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee. I have the distinct privilege of introducing a young, female veteran who this bill specifically affects. She will testify to that. Non-passage of this bill will, of course, affect her employment and many other veterans' employment. So at this time, I would like to introduce a young Navy veteran, Carmen Peralta.

Carmen.

MS. PERALTA: Thank you.

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and Committee. I thank you for the opportunity to be here and testify before you all. My name is Carmen Peralta. I live in Pemberton Township, and I was born in Paterson, New Jersey, and have been a New Jersey resident all my life.

I'm a little nervous, I'm sorry.

I was in the Navy from April of '95 to 2000, and I was a dental technician, which I enjoyed very much. I was discharged after six years of service due to my son's cerebral palsy disability. In 2001, my former husband at the time was transferred to Fort Dix -- as he was also a service member in the Army -- at which time I enrolled at Burlington County College under the GI Bill. While I was at the college, an employee gave me the name of Samuel Podietz and told me that I should contact Burlington County Veterans Service Office and file a claim for service-connected disabilities.

Subsequently, I was awarded for service-connected disabilities, and since that time have had increases due to my condition -- and its progressively worsening. Upon graduation, in 2005, from Burlington County College in Pemberton, New Jersey, I was offered employment at the

Burlington County Veterans Services office by Mr. Samuel Podietz. Mr. Podietz had helped me file a claim for my service-connected disabilities.

I am now an employee at the Burlington County Veterans Services office, and my position there is a veterans' bilingual interviewer, specifically focusing on female veterans and Hispanic veterans, which is approximately 30 percent of the veteran population of Burlington County. Due to the New Jersey State Civil Service regulations, having not served in combat or in the theater, and recognized as a disabled veteran in some 45 to 46 of the 50 states, New Jersey does not classify me as a veteran, nor a disabled veteran. Yet, the Federal Government classifies me as a veteran. This nonveteran designation could ultimately cost me my position at Burlington County Military and Veterans Services office.

Upon the Department of Personnel listing these qualified for employment, since I have-- Excuse me. Since I am classified a nonveteran, I will be at the bottom of the list and will ultimately lose my position, because I am not classified as a veteran in the State of New Jersey. This is why I find it imperative that I testify before this Committee to explain the need for the bill to be passed.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of all our nonclassified veterans who have served their country with honor.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: Thank you, Carmen.

Any questions or anything? (no response)

Carmen, and Sam as well, thank you so much for coming and testifying today.

MS. PERALTA: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: I guess it was a few weeks ago, Sam or someone indicated that you would come today, and I am very proud of you for being here today and for making the case for people like you, and there are people like you across the state. And if there was ever a reason to do this, I think you certainly exemplify that reason. So thank you so much for being here.

It wasn't that hard, was it? (laughter) You did good.

MS. PERALTA: Thank you very much.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: Sam, did you want to add anything?

MR. PODIETZ: No. I think Carmen did a good job. Just thanks for the hearing.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: Okay. Thank you very much.

And next is Al Bucchi, the Legislative Director for the New Jersey Veterans of Foreign Wars, and a good friend.

A L B E R T B U C C H I: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee.

Yes, we are good friends, and you're a good friend to the veteran community, in general. And all of us are quite happy and quite pleased that we have advocates like you and this Committee, and that we have seen, especially in the last two years, an unbelievable amount of good veterans' legislation passing and becoming law. And this is the priority legislation. I know the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and also my companions in the American Legion, DAV, and all the other veteran services organizations -- I was just compelled-- I mean, I was in awe of the testimony from Colonel Abel and from Carmen. It is amazing -- they have

a lot in common, even though one was an officer and one was enlisted, they both wore the uniform, served their country with honor and distinction. Today, they both serve the State of New Jersey and the veterans' community with honor and distinction. And the other thing they have in common is that they're not recognized as veterans in the State of New Jersey. That is so unfair and unjust, and we have to make that change.

Mr. Chairman, I know we've been talking about this for many years. And the thing that was always the stumbling block was this constitutional amendment. I believe, in 1947, when our people put this amendment together, they probably thought there would never be another war. They were wrong, and it seems like we'll be in war for the rest of our lives, especially with the war on terrorism right now. No one is immune to being attacked. The service people -- we just had the possibility in Fort Dix. Thank God for good people, alert people. There could have been quite a few people wearing uniforms that could have been killed or injured, and, unfortunately, not recognized as veterans in New Jersey.

So I thank you for having this hearing. I just thank you, again, for being a friend, and all you out there for helping veterans in the State of New Jersey. And thank you for having the hearing.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: Al, I continue to be impressed by the Veterans of Foreign Wars. And I know, it was so long ago -- it could be eight or nine years ago.

MR. BUCCHI: It was nine years ago in a diner.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: Nine years ago. Al and I, and Mike Wysong sitting in some diner in Browns Mills, or Pemberton, or wherever it was, just talking about not exactly this subject, but what we can

do for the noncombat veteran, if you will. And what I find interesting, ladies and gentlemen, about the Veterans of Foreign Wars is, by the very fact that they're a veteran of foreign wars, they get veteran preference.

MR. BUCCHI: About 90 percent of us do.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: About 90 percent.

MR. BUCCHI: But you're correct.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: But that's my point. You're here, and they are you. And all of your comrades are fighting for those who, in the line of duty, who put on the uniform -- as Colonel Abel so eloquently talked about earlier -- that if you put on the uniform and you're ready to do whatever you have to do, and you're injured in the line of duty, it just seems that you should be taken care of by the United States of America. So again, my hat is off to the Veterans of-- I mean, to everyone, whether it's the Veterans of Foreign Wars or American Legion. But I can remember the first conversation, and it began with you, and then Mike Wysong, back in the very beginning.

So thank you, Al.

Any questions or--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CRUZ-PEREZ: No. I'm just waiting for everybody to testify, and then I will actually--

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: Oh, okay, fine. Okay.

MR. BUCCHI: I'm sure Assemblywoman Cruz-Perez will have a lot to say. This bill also affects her, too.

So, thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CRUZ-PEREZ: And you better believe it. (laughter)

I'm with you, Carmen.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: Thank you.

And from the American Legion, we have Ray Zawacki.

Thanks, Ray, for being here.

RAYMOND L. ZAWACKI: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to say a few words on this piece of legislation or this resolution. I also want to reiterate your comments a little earlier regarding the bipartisan support from the members of this Committee. It has been great, and it's really nice to see that. As we all know, it doesn't happen too often in Trenton, and it's really good to see both teams working together for the betterment of veterans.

I have furnished a written statement to your Committee Aide which you can read at your leisure. I don't want to prolong the meeting. Suffice it to say, that on behalf of the American Legion, and State Commander Chuck Robbins, and its 68,000 members, we support this resolution strongly. Military service is not without risk. Indeed, I would suggest that if I were a Marine on embassy duty in the beautiful city of London, I might have some serious concerns about my safety, in that city. And that's a democratic city in a free world.

So we support the legislation. We urge its release. And more importantly, we urge all the Committee members to follow up after its release and encourage your colleagues to get it posted and voted on.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: That's a great point that you made, Ray. And thank for being here all the time. You're one of those faces I keep seeing all the time. But thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: And next we have Paul Dormida, from the DAV; and also, John Scholtes.

PAUL E. DORMIDA: Yes. I'm Paul Dormida. I'm also a State Officer for the Disabled American Veterans, whose members are all disabled veterans. And this amendment would help dearly, though, with those who served our country and became disabled while serving. And because of the law in the State of New Jersey that only recognizes combat veterans, some cannot qualify. And I can testify to that fact, because I've had hundreds of gentlemen come up to me in my hometown, and state the fact that they were in the service 12 years and were injured, but weren't in a combat zone, so they weren't qualified as veterans. And I find it shameful that that happened. But we wholeheartedly support this amendment.

DON SCHOLTES: My name is Don Scholtes. I'm a Chairman of Operation Firing for Effect, and I'm a Commander of Chapter 20 of the Brick DAV. I'm a wounded combat veteran from Vietnam.

Sometimes when one person has something over another -- such as me getting a bonus on my test mark and another guy doesn't -- he would say, "That's okay." But because we're veterans, we all shared a very, very deep, sincere, honest part of our life. In fact, most of us gave our youth to this country. And by doing that, we earned things that people call *entitlements*. And in this country, entitlements have been very slow in coming.

I congratulate this assembly here on bringing such a wonderful bill to the forefront. We in the DAV, for membership, have a more inclusive date of service. Consequently, many, many people can be

members. They're not excluded because they weren't in 1956 to '59, or things like that, that the Federal law and State law have. It's--

The troops coming home will be overwhelmed looking for work. If they don't come back with their heart in their hand, they come back looking to start a family, they come back with training that could benefit the municipalities in the state -- in the form of police department, fire department, infrastructure construction, medical training. I propose that in hiring these people with that extra benefit on the test in the long term, it would cost less, because you would have less training to put these people through. And also, these people have all been tried and tested. And as far as I know, they've all passed with flying colors. This bill can only help veterans, municipalities, and the State.

And I thank you for the courage to bring this to the forefront.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: Paul and Don, thank you so much for testifying today, and also for reminding us that, right now, as we speak -- I mean, it's up over 10,000, I think, veterans that have come back that have been wounded, and many of them seriously wounded or amputees. And the sacrifice is just-- You know, we are focused on the deaths -- and we should be focused on the deaths -- but we may not be as focused on those who have been wounded and have given up limbs, and some terrible things.

So thank you for your service to our country.

MR. SHULTIES: And just one short ending -- wounds can sometimes be outside, many times they're inside.

MR. DORMIDA: Right.

MR. SHULTIES: And that's something that has to be taken into consideration.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: That post-traumatic stress syndrome is a serious matter. And the more time I spend at this, I've been meeting a lot of families. And families are affected by this. I don't know how-- And I've been reading the articles lately: there's a knock at the door, the phone rings, is it someone coming to tell me that my husband, my son, my wife -- they've been killed? You know, it's a terrible depression, everything that sets in. So we have the soldier to deal with and we have a family member to deal with, on top of everything else, too.

MR. SHULTIES: I'd also like to thank DMAVA for the wonderful program they have for PTSD patients, by which they go outside and see outside psychologists in addition to the VA health-care system. I am a person who utilizes that. And without that, I wouldn't be speaking here today.

Thank you. Thank you for--

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: Well, that's great. And we'll count on Colonel Abel to take that back to General Rieth and let him know that.

Thank you very much, gentlemen.

MR. SHULTIES: You're welcome.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: And next, we have Hank Adams, the State Adjutant of the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Hank, thanks for being here.

H A N K A D A M S: Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, I thank you for all the work you've done this year. You've done an

outstanding job. And having been around for a while, it's been really an honor and a privilege to work with you. On this particular bill, I think it's long overdue, especially today with the young men and women that we have going overseas, coming back, disruption of their lives; some losing their businesses, jobs, so forth. This is just a helping hand. It's not the absolute. And I think you should very, very seriously consider passing this bill. It's long overdue, this resolution to get on the ballot.

And I can only say thank you again. Keep up the good work, and we look forward to working with you in the future.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: Thanks, Hank, and thanks for being there all the time. We appreciate it.

We also have Bill Thomson, State Legislative Committee, New Jersey Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Bill, thanks for being here, too.

WILLIAM THOMSON: Mr. Chairman, you say that before I even sit down.

Mr. Chairman, thank you, members of the Committee.

I would tell you that I have spent a greater part of my adulthood in the military. And then from there, in the Veterans of Foreign Wars. And although God has been good, and I certainly do not take advantage of many of the benefits that are offered, I'm here to testify for those that do need it.

You know, I look at these people that enter the military. Many of them do for only one reason -- their love of this country, their patriotism, their selflessness. And I believe anything and everything that they receive

in return, that they have earned. When this country was first founded, it was a civilian military that took up arms, that fought for the establishment of this country. These young men and women that are entering the service today enter with that same amount of patriotism. There may be those who believe that whatever benefits we have could be talked about as entitlements, yet we forget to talk about the entitlements that the rest of the country have earned from our service, and that is the entitlement of our American freedoms and liberties. Without those in service, we would not have them.

Having been a combat veteran in Vietnam, I was there to pick up the fractured bodies, the wounded people, put them on helicopters, send them back. Later on, I was stationed at Marine Barracks in Philadelphia, in the largest hospital on the East Coast for those who were amputees -- were there at Philadelphia Naval Hospital, where I again went and saw the devastations of war firsthand and the sacrifices that people make for this country. I don't think there is a hard line that divides those who are wounded or injured or disabled, whether they are in combat or not. When you put on that uniform, you agree to go wherever they send you. You may have a choice at times, but for the most part you go where they send you. You serve proudly and you serve with honor. And if you are disabled, just because you weren't disabled in combat, you deserve the same benefits.

I applaud you for moving this bill forward. I applaud you for this hearing. I will be out there, should we pass this, talking to the New Jersey public. I hope that you will, as well. And together, hopefully, that we find a bill that passes in November, through the public, that we can all

say that we worked together in order to bring us to the same standard that the Federal Government recognizes.

I thank you for your time.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: Thank you, Bill.

It's funny, I've been-- You know, you're absolutely right in the things that you talk about, and I always-- Whenever I'm at different meetings and with veterans and all -- and I guess I think of my dad -- but you're absolutely right about it. Everyone was young; they were basically-- I mean, I guess with the National Guard, I guess there's deployment of some soldiers that are older now. But the reality is, I guess, World War I and II, and Korea, and Vietnam is all kids. It was all young -- I call them kids -- they were probably anywhere from 18 to 21 years of age. And of course, we had the draft. But they were all young, and they gave up a lot. They gave up their youth. And of course, you still look pretty young. But it was a significant sacrifice.

So thank you, Bill, for your comments.

MR. THOMSON: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: And I want to mention, although the New Jersey State Fraternal Order of Police and the New Jersey State Professional Firefighters Association are in favor of this resolution, they don't want to speak. But they did leave a note here for me. Oh, and they did submit testimony. So, if I may-- Well, we'll leave it -- they-- I have two letters, and they're both in support. And I, for one, certainly appreciate it from the Firefighters and from the Police.

And I want to mention-- I would be remiss if I didn't mention -- and you all know Al Bucchi, who is the Legislative Chair for the Veterans

of Foreign Wars -- if there has been anyone who-- If he isn't in my office, if he isn't calling me on the phone -- it's mind boggling. You know, "When is this going to be done? When is it going to be posted? When are we going to have the public hearing? What is the Senate doing?" And so my hat is off to Al. If there's ever been a nudge, if there's ever been anybody who represents all of you well, whether you're American Legion, or DAV, or a Purple Heart -- whatever -- Al Bucchi has been out there pitching. And he certainly represents-- Not that the rest of you haven't been doing the same thing, because I see all of-- There's a certain group, and I keep seeing your faces all the time. And gentlemen and ladies, I appreciate it. Believe me, I appreciate it. And in terms of me, personally, the reality is that none of this gets done if -- if you don't push it, if you don't push me, if you don't push it, if you don't talk to my colleagues, if you don't talk to the people in the Senate, if you don't talk to the Steve Abels of the world. It doesn't happen. I wish it was real easy, and I wish I could snap my fingers, and I wish I had the power to do things instantly. But it doesn't happen that way.

Is there anyone else in the room who would like to come up and speak, that hasn't been heard?

I see Mike back there smiling. I don't know, but -- Mike, did you want to say anything or--

MICHAEL T. MIRAGLIUOLO: Very briefly.

Mr. Chairman, thank you very much for giving me this opportunity.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: By the way, is that light on? Is the red light on? (referring to PA microphone)

MR. MIRAGLIUOLO: Mr. Chairman, thank you for this opportunity you've given me to speak very briefly about this bill. Of course, I'm in favor of it.

My name is Michael Miragliuolo. I'm an Army combat veteran from Vietnam, and I'm presently a veterans' Service Officer from Burlington County.

Now earlier, you mentioned in order to get the 10-point preference, you had to be a wounded combat veteran.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: Be wounded in combat, yes.

MR. MIRAGLIUOLO: Wounded in combat. What about residual effects for our Vietnam vets that were exposed to Agent Orange, that now and later in life they've come down with prostate cancer, diabetes? Along with diabetes comes heart failure, coronary artery disease, renal failure. They are not considered a 10-point veteran? I'm getting a little emotional about this, because I deal with this all the time. Post-traumatic stress -- they're not wounded in combat, but they've seen something in their young lives that have stressed them out.

I've seen now, coming back, these young men and women from Iraq, and I look in their eyes and I see myself 40 years ago. Of course, 40 years ago we weren't recognized, so consequently a lot of us self-medicated. But today, we recognize this problem. But according to the New Jersey law, they don't get their 10-point veterans' preference because they are not wounded in combat. Like I said, I'm starting to get a little emotional here.

That's all I have to say on that subject.

And I appreciate the time and effort you're giving me.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: Thank you, Mike.

Okay, is there anyone else who would like to speak? (no response)

Vice Chair Nilsa Cruz-Perez.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CRUZ-PEREZ: Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to be with you in this important resolution. And I will say, *about time*. About time that people get recognized. About time that our service members get recognized for the hard work and dedication, and the honor they take when they put that uniform on.

To me, a veteran is someone who really leaves their family behind; someone who is willing to sacrifice, and make the ultimate sacrifice if it is necessary. When I took basic training, I was trained to go to war. Even though it was during peace time, I was trained to go to war. I was trained to be ready. If something happened to this country, I was ready to do what was necessary, and I knew that. I knew that it was going to be -- if I needed to make the ultimate sacrifice, I was going to do so.

We don't think of peace time, we think of defending this country regardless of where we are, whether you're overseas, whether you are here in the United States. Because now, these days, we're not even safe at home. And that's what happened in New York, and that's what happened in Washington. I mean, we're ready -- we put on an uniform and we're ready to do whatever is necessary. If you leave it to me, I will make anybody who puts that uniform on and serves with honor and dignity a veteran in the State of New Jersey. (applause) We're not going fine now, but this is the beginning.

And all of you-- And I have to say, Ray, you're right on the money -- military service is not without a risk. You don't know when you're

going to be at risk. And we are going to be at risk all the time, because we're willing to be at risk if we're asked to be at risk.

I tip my hat to all the veterans, to anybody who has worn that uniform with dignity. To my eyes, and through the eyes of the people on this Committee, you are a veteran, and we should be giving the preference to everybody. But now, this is just to make sure that we include this group of people now. And maybe we should be looking to make anybody who spent a good amount of time in the service, wearing that uniform with dignity, a veteran in the State of New Jersey.

God bless you, and I salute you today. And thank you for every single comment that all of you have made this morning.

Carmen, we're going to fight for you, sweetie.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: Anyone else? (no response)

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you. Thank all of you for taking time out this morning on this important issue. We talked about how long it's taken us to even get to this point. And it doesn't end -- it really doesn't end here. There are -- you will know from conversations you've had with me that I think this is just a beginning. Do we want the whole loaf? Yes, we do. But I'm trying to get as much of the loaf as I can, and get the cooperation of my colleagues, and taking a lot of things into consideration. But if we can do this, if we can make this happen, we will -- and change the Constitution, and it helps our veterans, and it helps people like Carmen, we will have done a world of wonder. It will be just a great day, and I look forward to it. But again, I'm especially proud of all of you. You are all making this happen -- you are all making this happen.

I want to end by reminding -- and I've said this before -- please come as often as you can when we have-- I'd like to see you come even when I'm not having a Committee meeting. I'd like to see you in the hallways. I'd like our members to see you with your hats on. I'd like them to just be constantly reminded that we have veterans. But if they don't see you -- and I can't get mad at anybody -- but if they don't see you, they're just going to forget. Whether it's in Washington D.C. or it's here in Trenton, or any of the capitals throughout the country, our members must see you. And more and more, as you look in the capitol halls, or you look in Washington, there are less and less of those members who have worn the uniform themselves. And sometimes you'd like to think that they could really understand this and understand what you've gone through, but it's hard. So they have to meet you, they have to see you, they have to hear you. You have to keep making your point. And I believe it's through repetition -- they keep seeing you, they cannot forget about you. That's why we have Memorial Day. That's why we do all the things that we do to keep reminding people. Because the day you don't do those things, people are going to forget. They will forget. I assure you they will forget.

So thank you for all you do. I know I'm preaching to the choir -- you all do it. But get your colleagues, get your comrades, get your friends -- and get them participating too. And it's through involvement, it's through participation that -- whether it's the American Legion, or the VFW, or the DAV, you will get members. More people will join your ranks if they see you and they see you doing things.

So with that, I'm going to close.

Thank you so much for-- I think we made this public hearing a success.

However, the Vice Chair wants to say something.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CRUZ-PEREZ: Just one second. I just-- I'm looking at the resolution in front of us, and I see very few members as a cosponsor. I'm going to give you homework. Go back, go talk to the people you represent -- talk to our brother and sister veterans -- and say to call every single legislator in the State of New Jersey to make sure that they come aboard on this important legislation, because they need to be aboard on this.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONNERS: Great point, Nilsa.

And again, thank you very much. And that's going to end today's meeting.

(HEARING CONCLUDED)