



Stephen Holmes, commander of the Ephraim Slaughter American Legion Post 733 in Harrisburg and member of the executive board of the Pennsylvania Taverns and Players Association (PA TAP)

Testimony for Senate Community, Economic and Recreational Development Committee Hearing on Oct. 4, 2023.

Senators, it is my pleasure to be here today and speak to all of you on this important topic.

I am Stephen Holmes, commander of the Ephraim Slaughter American Legion Post 733 in Harrisburg. We are located just a few short miles from this committee room.

I also am a board member of the Pennsylvania Taverns and Players Association. PA TAP strives to help businesses and fraternal organizations in tough financial times. We believe skill games are important for meeting that goal.

We Harrisburg veterans are proud of our American Legion post. It is named after Ephraim Slaughter who was a former slave who fought with Union soldiers in the Civil War. He later helped found the Union Civil War Veterans group in Harrisburg where he made sure those who served had the help they needed.

I tell you this because my post carries on his tradition. We pride ourselves on being open every day of the year. We don't ever, ever want a veteran in need to have no place to go. Our goal like his is to try and take care of veterans who need our assistance.

Chances are you or someone you love has visited an American Legion or VFW over the years, either as a guest or a member. American Legions and VFWs provide a sort of "watering hole" for the veteran community, a safe space where veterans can go and enjoy comradery and support among other veterans, who share similar experiences and grapple with similar demons.

Veterans have been through a lot. I don't think I have to tell you that. They have seen and experienced things most civilians will never have to – and thank goodness for that. So having a place where they can be with their peers and unwind is important.

Most veterans are not wealthy. So American Legions and VFWs try to keep our menu and beverage prices as affordable as we can. But the downside is that we don't turn much of a profit, and oftentimes no profit at all. As we struggle to get new members and face growing costs, it is hard for many of us to keep our doors open.

That's why I am so thankful for Pennsylvania Skill games. I know a lot of people tell you what they do with the revenue they receive from the skill games. And I will too. But I first want to ask you something. Where do you think organizations like mine would be today without skill games?

How would Post 733 bring in the revenue we need to pay bills and do what is needed for our community without skill games?

I can tell you veterans groups across the state would have closed their doors if it weren't for skill games. They never would have made it out of COVID. Our post took a huge financial hit because of the pandemic. Thankfully we had skill games to fall back on. They make a tremendous difference for us. We would not be able to accomplish nearly as much as we do if it weren't for having them at our post.

The skill games allow us to provide a Toys for Tots program, and community activities, along with funding for upkeep and improvements to our post. We can serve veterans who are sick or homeless and help them, allowing them to get back on their feet.

As for the games themselves, many members and guests at the post enjoy playing them. They have become a popular fixture at our place. An extra thing to do while they are at our place.

Finally, many VFWs and American Legions count on skill games. They give us the ability and resources to help our organizations help our veterans. We need to make sure that doesn't go away. The impact would be devastating.

Thank you for your time.