

**PENNSYLVANIA STATE VETERANS' COMMISSION MEETING
KEYSTONE CONFERENCE CENTER
FORT INDIANTOWN GAP
ANNVILLE, PA 17003-5002**

Friday, September 11 2015

1. **CALL TO ORDER:** The State Veterans' Commission (SVC) meeting was called to order at 10:00AM by Chairman John Brenner.
2. **INVOCATION/PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE:** The meeting was opened with an invocation and the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance.
3. **COMMISSION INTRODUCTION:** Commission members introduced themselves and their guests in attendance.
4. **OATH OF OFFICE:** Brigadier General, (USA, Retired), Jerry G. Beck, Jr., administered the Oath of Office to the following newly appointed State Veterans Commission members:
 - Mr. E. Michael Stelacio – Commander – American Legion
 - Mr. Bernie McDonald – Commander – AMVETS
 - Mr. Nicholas Taylor – Commander – Catholic War Veterans
 - Mr. Walter Simpson – Commander – Disabled American Veterans
 - Mr. Thomas Bremer – Commander – Italian American War Veterans
 - Mr. Allan Abramson – Commander – Jewish War Veterans
 - Mr. Glenn R. Umberger, Jr. – Commander – Veterans of Foreign War
5. **REVIEW AND APPROVAL OF MEETING MINUTES:** Minutes from the June 5, 2015 meeting were presented for approval. Mr. Dominic DiFrancesco made a motion to approve the meeting minutes as presented. Mr. Michael Mescavage seconded the motion. The motion carried and the minutes were approved.
6. **REVIEW AND APPROVAL OF MEETING CALENDAR:** A proposed meeting calendar was submitted. Mr. Michael Mescavage made a motion to accept the meeting calendar as proposed. Mr. John Cyprian seconded the motion. The motion carried and the meeting schedule was approved. The 2016 State Veterans' Commission meeting schedule can be found at www.dmvpa.gov.
7. **ARMY NATIONAL GUARD UPDATE:** COL Mark Schindler, Chief of Staff, provided the Commission an update on current and upcoming PA Army National Guard deployments. There are currently 154 Guard-members deployed. That number changes weekly. COL Schindler provided a breakdown of the units deployed. They are still contributing to the Global War on Terrorism even though deployment numbers have gone down.

~What efforts are being made to address suicide among Guard-members?

There are trained personnel in every guard formation. Training includes: how to notice, react and relate to soldiers to identify and recognize signs of crisis. We have developed cards, given to all guard-members, to know who that person is, also what to look out for/signs of crisis. The goal is to get everyone in formations to know the signs of crisis and where to go for help.

8. **AIR NATIONAL GUARD UPDATE:** Maj Angela Stateler provided the Commission an update on current and upcoming PA Air National Guard deployments. There are 114 Air National Guard-members currently deployed. 350 additional Air National Guard-members are scheduled to deploy.
9. **VISN 4 UPDATE:** Dr. Michael Adelman, Director, Wilkes-Barre VAMC, provided the following VISN 4 update:
 - **Leadership Update:**
 - William H. Mills, Altoona VA Director, has been serving as the interim director of VA Healthcare VISN 4 since August 10th.
 - Charles T. Becker has been serving as the acting director of the Altoona VAMC.
 - Barbara Forsha has been serving as the interim director of VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System since June 15th.
 - Pittsburgh and Butler director positions are still open.
 - **Phone Tree:**

Concerns about the message heard when calling a VAMC instructing Veteran's in crisis to hang up and dial another number were brought up at the June meeting. We are happy to report the national team has kicked off an effort to change this. 11 sites around the country, including Altoona and Philadelphia, began participation in an automatic call transfer pilot. The new language for the standard greeting says: "If you are having thoughts of suicide, press 7 now to be connected with the Veterans Crisis Line. Or, you may call 1-800-273-8255, then press 1." Upon completion of the pilot evaluation, a complete timeline for incremental national implementation will be developed and disseminated.
 - **Suicide Prevention Month:**

This September, during Suicide Prevention Month, the VA participated in "Power of 1 Suicide Prevention outreach initiative". This initiative emphasized how just one act can encourage Veterans and Service Members to reach out for support when they are in need. Their goal is to spread the word about available VA mental health and suicide prevention resources and encourage Veterans, Service Members, and their families to use them.
 - **National Veterans Small Business Engagement (NVSBE):**

This event will be held on November 17 to 19 at the David L. Lawrence Convention Center in Pittsburgh. This event provides an opportunity for Veteran-Owned Small Businesses and Service Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Businesses access to program managers, project managers, and contracting experts from the federal and commercial marketplace. For more information, visit www.nvsbe.com.
 - **Summer of Service:**

As part of VA's Summer of Service, each VISN 4 facility held an open house and invited the community to learn how they could support the needs of Veterans. For more information visit, www.volunteer.va.gov. Additionally, each VISN 4 facility holds a quarterly town hall meeting. For more information visit, www.visn4.va.gov. During the Summer of Service, Secretary Bob McDonald traveled widely to share his vision for VA's future and to promote MyVA. For more information visit, www.va.gov/opa/myva.

10. OLD BUSINESS:

- **Policy, Planning and Legislative Update:** Mr. Joel Mutschler provided the following legislative update:
 - HB 175 – Extends Persian Gulf War Bonus Program – Continue to work that issue with staff.
 - Preparing executive order on the Governor's Advisory Council for Veterans Services (GAV-VS) to incorporate lessons learned since the GAC-VS inception.
 - If you know of someone who needs to register to vote, you can now do that online at www.register.votesPA.com. The deadline for this election cycle is October 5, 2015.

Enacted State Legislation:

 - Act 11 (HB 131) – Amends Act 287 of 1982 to provide reduced tuition rates at community colleges and state related/owned institutions for Veterans, their spouses and dependent children.
 - Act 17 (SB 284) – Honoring Our Veterans license plate for motorcycles
 - Act 18 (SB 285) – Allows money collected from Honoring Our Veterans license plates for motorcycles to be transferred to the Veterans' Trust Fund.
 - Act 23 (HB 157) – Amends Chapter 75 of Title 51 by requiring certain Commonwealth agencies to strongly consider a Veteran's military education, training and experience for the purpose of possibly receiving waivers for professional credentials.
 - Act 32 (SB 42) – Provides penalties for anyone falsely claiming to be a Veteran to obtain Veterans status on a driver's license.

Enacted Federal Legislation:

 - P.L. 114-31 (H.R. 91) – Veterans Identification Card Act of 2015
 - P.L. 114-38 (H.R. 2499) – Veterans Entrepreneurship Act of 2015
 - P.L. 114-41 (H.R. 3236) – Surface Transportation and Veterans Health Care Choice Improvement Act of 2015
- **State Veterans' Homes Update:** Mr. Ed Beck provided the Commission with a Homes' update. The total State Veterans' Homes occupancy is 92%. The rate for Nursing Care/Dementia occupancy is 95%. Occupancy for Personal Care/Domiciliary is 81%. Gino J. Merli Veterans' Center (GMVC) remains on Provisional Licensure. GMVC is currently in compliance and is awaiting an unannounced inspection from the Department of Health (DOH).

Monthly Maintenance Fees:

 - Maintenance fees are calculated based upon what the resident can afford to pay out of pocket.
 - Maintenance fees are recalculated annually and upon changes in individual financial matters.
 - The outstanding balance for current maintenance fees is \$511,390. The Bureau of Veterans' Homes (BVH) is currently working with 81 residents who have unpaid monthly maintenance fees. The reasons for the delay vary from unexpected financial matters with families to outright refusal to pay. BVH is always willing to work with residents to make arrangements for payment. Regulation states failure to pay maintenance fees is grounds for discharge.

All six Veterans' Homes have established monthly newsletters for residents, families, and staff. The newsletter provides information on upcoming events, recent activities and

other interesting facts and articles for sharing. Newsletters are available at the home and online at www.dmva.pa.gov.

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| ➤ Delaware Valley Veterans' Home | Valley Voice |
| ➤ Gino Merli Veterans' Center | Merli Messenger |
| ➤ Hollidaysburg Veterans' Home | A New Beginning |
| ➤ Pennsylvania Soldiers' and Sailors' Home | Blockhouse Beacon |
| ➤ Southeaster Veterans' Center | Vet Gazette |
| ➤ Southwestern Veterans' Center | Old Glory |

- **PIRO Update:** Mr. Rick Hamp, provided the Commission details regarding the Veterans' Trust Fund. Since June's meeting the Trust Fund has received over \$466,000 in check-off's and donations. The cumulative total is over 2 million dollars since the inception of the Veterans' Trust Fund. Grants provided since inception of the Trust Fund totals nearly 1 million dollars. We continue to pay PennDOT, the remaining balance is \$478,000, which equals to 3 more payments.

Veterans' Appreciation Day: Will be held October 10, 2015 at Ft. Indiantown Gap. Draft itinerary has been provided in the handouts. This event is hosted by DMVA and our Service Organization Partners. Agenda will be posted at www.dmva.pa.gov.

- **Veterans' Programs Update:** Mr. Brian Natali presented the Veterans Programs Report for approval "in total". The State Veterans Commission held a singular vote to encompass the following reports as presented:
 - Veterans Temporary Assistance report:
 - ❖ Funded through the Veterans' Trust Fund
 - ❖ Budgeted \$700,000
 - ❖ 172 claimants have been paid for a total of \$142,617
 - ❖ Do not expect a lapse on this program
 - Blind Veterans Pension report:
 - ❖ \$220,000 has been proposed in the executive budget
 - ❖ 118 Veterans on the program
 - ❖ Expended \$50,400 this year
 - ❖ Do not expect a lapse on this program
 - Paralyzed Veterans Pension report:
 - ❖ \$3,500,000 has been proposed in the executive budget
 - ❖ Expended \$540,600
 - ❖ 1,789 claimants on the program
 - ❖ Predict this program will be stabilized since Act 180 of 2014
 - Educational Gratuity Program report:
 - ❖ \$601,000 projected funding is due to SB 345
 - ❖ No payments have been made due to the budget impasse
 - ❖ Still accepting application, they will be forwarded to the schools once the budget has passed
 - Disabled Veterans' Real Estate Tax Exemption Program report:
 - ❖ 9,238 Veterans on the program
 - ❖ Approved 1,076 applications
 - ❖ Denied (Financial Need) 45
 - ❖ Denied (Ineligible) 58
 - ❖ 739 applications have been received
 - ❖ Total of over 2,000 applications that were processed, new and review, over the summer

Mr. Michael Mescavage made a motion to approve the reports as presented. Mr. Glenn Umberger seconded the motion. The motion carried.

- Disabled Veterans' Real Estate Tax Exemption Program – 5 Acre Rule:
 - ❖ Mr. Natali presented thirteen requests for waiver to the five acre rule. Chairman Brenner called for discussion from commission members. Seeing none, Chairman Brenner stated they would stay on the standing motion regarding the five acre rule, therefore the exceptions were denied.
- Persian Gulf Bonus Program (no vote required): Mr. Natali provided an update report on the Persian Gulf Bonus Program
 - ❖ Application period has expired, HB 175 extends the program an additional 3 years
 - ❖ If you encounter Persian Gulf Veterans who are eligible for the bonus, have them complete the application and send it to our office. We will date stamp the application and if HB 175 is passed we will adjudicate it at that time.
 - ❖ Total applications – 11,592
 - ❖ Total payments - \$3.8 million
 - ❖ Processing time – just under 5 days
- Military Family Assistance Program (MFRAP) (no vote required): Mr. Natali provided an update report on the Military Family Assistance Program
 - ❖ Total contributions – over \$1.6 million
 - ❖ Account balance – \$934,000
- **Outreach & Reintegration Update:**
 - Mr. Chip Gilliland briefed the commission on the following Act 66 update. Year to date claims total 1,924. Recoveries total \$10,262,747.
 - Mr. Gilliland provide the following outreach update:
 - ❖ 22 outreach events supported the first quarter
 - ❖ The budget impasse has restricted our travel to events
 - ❖ About 12 events have been cancelled since July 1, 2015
 - ❖ 733 Veteran interactions
 - In 2009, the Federal VA started to end homelessness by 2015. One initiative supported across the nation is the “Mayor’s Challenge”. The mayor gets the community and all the resources available within the community to place homeless Veterans in permanent housing. There are 8 Governor’s that have accepted this challenge. Governor Wolf has also accepted this challenge. We are looking to permanently house 550 Veterans by the end of 2015.
 - Q: Who can participate in the Act 66 program?
 - A: As far as Chairman Brenner is aware, any Veteran Service Organization that wants to submit an application is eligible to do so.

11. NEW BUSINESS:

- BG Beck presented the Commission the following Annual Reports: (provided in packet)
 - Veterans' Trust Fund (VTF)
 - Military Family Relief Assistance Program (MFRAP)
 - Persian Gulf Conflict Veterans' Benefit
- Mr. Mike Starr presented information regarding the Federal Surplus Property Program. The Federal Government and civilian agencies, daily, surplus property that is no longer needed. Surplus items include medical equipment, office supplies, furniture, office equipment and much more. These items are then made available to municipalities,

emergency services, and other nonprofit, tax-exempt organizations. DGS, Federal Surplus Property Program receives these items and makes it available to organizations. The For Vets Act of 2013 expands the program to include Veteran Organizations. More information can be found at

http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/federal_surplus_property_program.

- Mr. Jason Manne presented information regarding the University of Pittsburgh Veterans' Clinic. One of four Veterans' Clinics in PA, concentrating on disability claims and discharge upgrades. The Veterans' Clinic wants to work with the Veterans' Organizations to serve Veterans. There are steps the law clinic can accomplish for Veterans that Veteran Service Officers are not able to and steps Veteran Service Officers can accomplish that the law clinic is not able to. We need to work together, not one or the other.

12. GOOD OF THE ORDER / ANNOUNCEMENTS:

- General Beck thanked the DAV and Samuel Petrovich for their assistance in finding a Veteran in need of a wheel chair, donated by Senator Mensch.
- Chairman Brenner thanked Joyce Gibson for her assistance in preparing the State Veterans Commission meetings.

13. NEXT MEETING:

Friday, **October 2**, 2015 at 10:00AM
Arrowheads Community Club
Fort Indiantown Gap
Annville, PA 17003

14. ADJOURNMENT: The meeting was adjourned at 11:30AM.

15. ROLL CALL:

- **Members Present:**

Mr. John Brenner, Chairman, State Veterans Commission
Mr. Gerald Hawk, Vice Chairman, State Veterans Commission
Mr. Dominic DiFrancesco, Member at Large
Ms. Jeannine Botta Guth, Member at Large
Mr. Neil Appleby, President, Blinded Veterans Association
Mr. Chris Fidler, Director, Keystone Paralyzed Veterans of America
Mr. James Powell, Commandant, Marine Corps League
Mr. Robert Gray, President, Military Officers Association of America
Mr. John Getz, Jr., State Adjutant/Quartermaster, Veterans of Foreign Wars
Mr. Thomas Haberkorn, President, Vietnam Veterans of America
Mr. Samuel Petrovich, Adjutant, Disabled American Veterans
Mr. E. Michael Stelacio, Commander, American Legion
Mr. Kit Watson, Adjutant, American Legion
Mr. Bernie McDonald, Commander, AMVETS
LTC (Ret.) Nicholas Taylor, Commander, Catholic War Veterans
Mr. John Cyprian, President, County Directors of Veterans' Affairs
Mr. Walter Simpson, Commander, Disabled American Veterans
Mr. Thomas Bremer, Commander, Italian American War Veterans

Mr. Allan Abramson, Commander, Jewish War Veterans
Mr. Michael Mescavage, Commander, Military Order of the Purple Heart
Mr. Charles Jackson, Adjutant, Military Order of the Purple Heart
Mr. Glenn R. Umberger, Jr., Commander, Veterans of Foreign Wars

- **Members Absent:**

Mr. Harold Gennaria, Commissioner, Emeritus

- **Others Present:**

BG, USA, (Retired) Jerry G. Beck, Secretary, State Veterans Commission
Mr. Nate Silcox, Senate VAEP
Mr. Brian Natali, DMVA-VA
Mr. Chip Gilliland, DMVA-VA
Mr. John Tokarczyk, Office of Attorney General
Mr. Hank Fiola, MCL
Mr. Anthony DiFrancesco, Dauphin County VA
Mr. Bob Cudworth, DAV
Ms. Katie Johnson, TAA
Mr. Joel Mutschler, DMVA-PPL
Mr. Ed Beck, DMVA-VA Homes
Mr. Jeffrey R. White, VVA
Mr. Tim Bremer
Mr. Timothy Cleveland, Tioga County VA
Ms. Colleen Washinger, Dauphin County VA
Mr. Rich Hudzinski, VVA
Dr. Michael Adelman, Director, Wilkes-Barre VAMC
Mr. Louis Abramson, JWV
Mr. Dan Osten, A.L.
Ms. Richelle Savant, A.L.
Mr. Michael Iacavazzi, DAV
Mr. John Pliska, AMVETS
Ms. Angela Stateler, JFHQ-Air
Ms. Stephanie Buchanan, PA Senate
Mr. Raymond Greene, DAV
Ms. Kate VanAvicow, IAVA
Mr. Tom Minchin, MCL
Mr. Eugene Bell, NERA-Keystone Chapter
Ms. Joyce Gibson, DMVA-VA

The minutes of this meeting are respectfully submitted by:

Jerry G. Beck, Jr.
Brigadier General, USA, Retired
Deputy Adjutant General
Veterans' Affairs