

**Governor's Advisory Council on Veterans Services
Building 9-65, Arrowheads Community Club
Fort Indiantown Gap
Annville, PA 17003**

March 27, 2019

MEETING MINUTES

1. **Call to Order:** Ms. Crystal Petery, called the Governor's Advisory Council on Veterans' Services to order at 1:02 PM.

- Pledge of Allegiance and moment of silence.
- Introduction of the Council was conducted.

2. **Introductions:** The following Council Members, Representatives, designees and others were present:

Ms. Valerie Vicari - Office of Mental Health & Substance Abuse Svcs.
Mr. Jeff Geibel - Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs
Ms. Christine Hawk - Department of Education
Mr. Andrew Barnes - Governor's Policy Office
Ms. Cheryl Cook - Department of Agriculture
Mr. Sam Petrovich - State Veteran Commission
Maj. Gen. (Ret) Eric Weller, Deputy Adjutant General for Veterans' Affairs - Chairman
Ms. Crystal Petery - DMVA, Office of Veterans' Affairs
COL (Ret) H. Ward Adams - Member at Large
Mr. Rich Podguski - PA Board of Probation and Parole
Mr. Ryan Yoder - Department of Corrections
Mr. Larry Furlong - PA Fish and Boat Commission
Mr. Tim Irvin - DMVA, Information Technology
Mr. Eric Felty - DMVA, Information Technology
Mr. Terry Stokes - Pennsylvania VFW
Ms. Donna Hess - Dept. of Human Services, Office of Mental Health & Substance Abuse Svcs.
Mr. Kraig Kiehl - Department of Education
Mr. Joel Mutschler - DMVA, Office of Veterans' Affairs
Mr. Frederick Nardei, Jr. - U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs
Mr. Michael Sullivan - Office of Administration
Mr. Cory Bender - DMVA, Office of Veterans' Affairs
Mr. Mark Todero - PA Army National Guard, State Military Family Services
Dr. Scott Sheely - Department of Agriculture
Mr. James Fearn - Office of Long-Term Living
Ms. Janice Mazzitti - Department of Labor and Industry
SSG Jose Lopez - PA Army National Guard, State Military Family Services
Mr. Randal McKinney - Department of Education
Mr. Kevin Longenecker - Department of Aging
Mr. Robert Cherry - Department of Aging
Mr. Thomas Applebach - Lehigh County Director of Veterans' Affairs
Mr. Brian Natali - DMVA, Office of Veterans' Affairs
Ms. Joan Nissley - DMVA, Office of Public Affairs
Mr. Norm Marden - Office of Attorney General
Mr. Bruce Beemer - Office of Inspector General
Mr. Rick Hamp - DMVA, Office of Veterans' Affairs

3. Old Business:

- **Review and Approval of November 14, 2018 Meeting Minutes**

COL (Ret) Ward Adams motioned to approve the minutes, Mr. Rich Podguski seconded.

- **Aging Committee:** Mr. Brian Natali, Committee Member shared that the Aging Committee's vision statement is to "expand the awareness of and access to services, supports, benefits, and opportunities for Pennsylvania's aging Veterans and their families and caregivers." The committee has been continuing the communication between the County Directors for Veterans Affairs and the Directors for the Area Agencies on Aging. So far, there have been 5 introductions made, most recently in Potter County and Huntingdon County. The Benefits and Rights for Older Pennsylvanians books have been supplied to the 6 Veterans Homes, TAAs, VISN 4 Medical Centers, and annual VSO accreditation training. A collaboration between DMVA and Department of Aging to reach the individuals on the PACE Program and in the Veterans Registry and promote each. They are also looking to increase education on the PACE Program for VSOs, VISN, and community providers. The committee has been discussing the need for awareness on of PA Chapters of the Alzheimer's Association. The hope is to have representatives from the Alzheimer's Association present at the County Director's for Veterans Affairs conference. The Alzheimer Association has expressed a desire to meet with VA representatives. The Aging Committee has been working with VA Pittsburgh to discuss how Veterans Directed Care can be offered. On January 9, 2019 Department of Aging hosted a webinar on the Caregiver Support Program, which is administered through the Area Agencies on Aging. The webinar provided a cross-system education session to 12 veteran-system participants.

Mr. Larry Furlong briefed that they have created a small working group to explore opportunities between Department of Aging, PA Department of Conservation Natural Resources, PA Council on the Arts, and PA Fish and Boat Commission. They held a webinar to try to enhance and showcase the community involvement, socialization, and outdoor activities that are available to aging veterans, their families, and caregivers. They would like to get more of their information circulated and are now looking at submitting information to three online newsletters. Mr. Furlong gave the example of trout stocking in streams; the article explained trout stocking and provided links to where people could go to participate in and/or volunteer with these activities. They are also planning to hold another webinar soon.

Mr. Natali further briefed that the committee is working with the County Directors and Services Organizations on education about Aid and Attendance Scams. There is discussion of revitalizing "Don't Pay for Your Benefits" campaign. Dr. Darryl Jackson informed the Council that the Expanding Long-Term Care Subcommittee has been formed under the Aging Committee. Their focus will be expanding services provided by the Bureau of Veterans Homes (BVH). This would expand services to include adult day care in addition to the personal and long-term care they currently provide. Maj. Gen. (Ret) Eric Weller asked Dr. Jackson to read off the charter for this group to give everyone an idea of what they are including. In scope for this group is Medicare part A billing, information and referrals, drug and alcohol treatment services, behavioral health and suicide prevention services, long-term care services in the community and at BVH facilities, Veteran homelessness, transition assistance for incarcerated Veterans, Department of Health regulations, and overcoming funding barriers.

- **Education, Employment and Workforce Development Committee:** Mr. Cory Bender presented the committee vision statement of “To create greater awareness and synergy among government entities that serve veterans at the point they are asking themselves ‘what do I want to do next’ as it relates to employment, self-employment, education or retaining. He explained that some new committee efforts include the Veteran Employment Dashboard, U.S. Small Business Administration, and Veterans and Agriculture. Veteran Employment Dashboard is Labor and Industry’s Center for Workforce and Analysis product development to track indicators that will show United States and Pennsylvania data trends for employment rates, participation rates, and Veteran representation in the total labor force. More on the Small Business Administration will be briefed in detail at the November 2019 GAC-VS quarterly meeting. Dr. Scott Sheely with PA Department of Agriculture attended the National Farmer Veteran Coalition Conference and brought back some great information and new opportunities to explore here in the Commonwealth. Once further developed, Dr. Sheely will present on them. Military Day at the 2019 Pennsylvania Farm Show was a great connection between the military community, Veterans, and agriculture. Dr. Scott Sheely was honored with an accommodation medal by The Adjutant General, MG Anthony Carrelli.

The Department of Military and Veterans Affairs Weekly Digest has been a great resource to promote employment opportunities for Veterans with other state agencies. Mr. Bender mentioned that recently the PA Fish and Boat Commission, Department of Education, and Department of Labor and Industry provided information on open positions and directed all interested applicants to the commonwealth employment site.

Mr. Michael Sullivan briefed on the employment for Veteran in state government and some local positions. PA Military Code 51, Chapter 71 provides Veterans preference in both civil service and non-civil service positions. He explained that the hiring for civil service positions is moving away from written examinations and now utilizing evaluations of experience and training. Candidates now answer supplemental questions when applying which then gives them their scoring. They are then ranked based on score order and Veteran candidates within the ‘rule of 3’ are offered that position. Non-Civil Service doesn’t require an examination or series of questions however the applications are reviewed to determine if the applicant meets the minimum qualifications for the position. By policy, if a Veteran meets the minimum qualifications, they are guaranteed an interview. The hiring manager then will determine beyond the minimum qualifications and meets the requisite qualifications. If a Veteran then meets the requisite qualifications, they must be offered the position. The Office of Administration, Bureau of Talent Acquisition oversees the hiring for the positions. The Bureau of Enterprise Recruitment is responsible for recruitment on a Commonwealth-wide basis and ensuring that Veterans are aware of opportunities. The HR Delivery Centers are ensuring that the hiring managers are correctly applying Veterans preference in hiring decisions. The State Civil Service Commission will retain responsibility for auditing the operations of Office of Administration regarding functions to include Veterans hiring and serve as the adjudicatory body. The purpose of consolidating the Civil Service Commission under the Office of Administration was to modernize and get to one single platform where candidates go to apply for civil service and non-civil service positions.

There are some positions that will still require a written exam and there are vendors that they are considering using which will expand the number of locations throughout the state from 7 to 70-80 testing locations. Some of those vendors have the capability to proctor a test to deployed military personnel which will allow them to apply for jobs before returning home. Mr. Sullivan provided the data that Veterans make up 4% of Pennsylvania’s working age population and 75% of them served prior to the Gulf War.

Questions/Comments: Mr. Richard Podguski asked how they defined working age. Mr. Sullivan replied that he believes it is ages 18-65. COL (Ret) Ward Adams inquired how the testing process would work for job applicants who are overseas and returning to the Commonwealth. Mr. Sullivan explained that the Civil Service Commission is already doing this because they have certified proctors on many military bases. The goal is by having the capability to test from any location, it will expand the candidate draw from Veterans who are already out and looking for employment to soon-to-be Veterans who will coming out of the military. He compared it to going to college campuses to get the best candidates before other companies hire them.

Congratulations and many thanks to Ms. Christine Hawk. Christine will be retiring from the Department of Education. Her dedicated work in helping Veterans with the GI Bill and post-911 GI Bill is greatly appreciated.

- **Health and Behavioral Service Committee:** Mr. Joel Mutschler, Chair shared the vision statement of “Connect service members, veterans, and their families regionally with health and behavioral services to improve mental well-being.” Regarding the Fairweather Lodge initiative, there are no new lodges that have been opened. Dr. Darryl Jackson and Mr. Rick Hamp are representing the department on the steering committee for Community Centered Behavioral Health Clinics. Currently there are 310 Veterans, 5 active duty service members, and 7 national guard/reserve service members enrolled. Mental Health First Aid courses are being offered at no cost at various private organizations throughout the Commonwealth. The Tobacco Free PA Working Group participated in a webinar which provided updates on progress made to meet goals and will encourage other organizations to adopt tobacco-free practices. Two initiatives under the Opioid Use Disorder Response are Veterans Crisis Outreach and the Veteran Service Officer Awareness Training. There is a plan to develop a media campaign to bring awareness of the opioid crisis and the resources that are available to the Veteran community. The Veteran Service Officer Awareness training will occur in October during the annual accreditation training. This training will be for Veteran Service Officers with DMVA, County Directors for Veterans Affairs offices, and other service organizations. The Problem Gambling Consortium will be held on Friday, March 29, 2019 so more will be briefed at the next GAC-VS Quarterly Meeting on that.

Questions/Comments: Mr. Rich Podguski asked how the Opioid Housing Program worked. Mr. Jeff Geibel explained that it can provide housing and supplemental funding for housing. Both rural and urban areas have been awarded grants. Mr. Podguski asked if it includes medically assisted treatments; the answer is ‘yes’.

Mr. Mutschler briefed that the Joint Committee on Homelessness has a vision statement of, “The Joint Committee on Homelessness will collaborate with federal, state, local government, and community partners to identify and build resource awareness for Veterans experiencing or at risk of homelessness.” The committee is working on building a resource list which will also be utilized to inform DMVA’s regionalization plan. DMVA and Aging staff have been visiting Adult Day and LIFE program sites. As of January 2018, Pennsylvania estimates a count of 200 homeless Veterans. Maj. Gen. (Ret) Eric Weller stated that DMVA has been visiting many of the 501(c)3 organizations that participate in the HUD-VASH Program and many of them deal with supportive services. Homelessness is usually not the beginning issue, but more a result of other issues related to unemployment, substance abuse and addictions, mental health, etc.

- **Women Veteran Committee:** Ms. Crystal Petery provided the committee update to the Council as the Women Veteran Committee was invited to attend Women Veterans Day at the Governor's residence. The committee's continued mission is to conduct women Veteran outreach, hold a women Veterans focus in annual Veteran symposiums, Identify Gaps in benefits, programs and services for Women Veterans. The committee members have broken down into working groups to further analyze the 761 survey responses and hundreds of comments, plan and conduct another Town Hall and Expo, and identify Women Veteran Groups for the purpose of collaboration. The next Town Hall/Expo is going to be held in Pittsburgh in May 2019 with the support of DMVA, Veterans Multi-Service Center and the VA Pittsburgh. Once again, any agency that is willing to support the event by sending a representative as an exhibitor, please contact Jodi or me.

Questions/Comments: Maj. Gen. (Ret) Eric Weller wanted to clarify that the survey findings are not unique to Pennsylvania. We have taken a lot of the medical related concerns to VISN4 and they are already aware of them. In turn, they are trying to modernize their hospitals and community-based clinics. The clinic that opened in Cumberland County most recently now includes a female specific examining room. Col. (Ret) Ward Adams stated that out of the 60,000 PA Women Veterans only 761 responded to the survey and asked why that may be. The survey was available through DMVA's website, but the biggest challenge was promoting it.

- **Judiciary Committee:** Mr. Ryan Yoder, Chair briefed the council that the Judiciary Committee has added Mr. Norm Marden with the Office of Attorney General and Mr. Andy Simpson with the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts. He shared that the mission of the Judiciary Committee is "to build productive and sustaining relationships with GAC-VS committee members and other Veteran-related organizations in order to collaborate and expand services and support for justice involved Veterans in such a way to promote public safety, reduce recidivism and costs while improving the lives of Veterans, their families, and our communities. All Veterans deserve the opportunity to be identified, educated, and provided services and support regardless of background and circumstance. We will leave no Veteran behind." Recently Mr. Yoder has put together a leadership team of 24 members, which included Secretary Wetzel to serve lunch to 40 Veterans at the Paul r. Gordon Veteran Social Center in Reading, PA. They also delivered employee donated food, clothing, and basic care items to the center. The Veteran Service Units are operating very well. SCI-Mercer currently has a waiting list. SCI-Muncy and SCI-Phoenix are the 2 newest facilities to offer a VSU. An article on SCI-Muncy can be found at <http://correctionalnews.com/2019/01/30/pennsylvania-doc-opens-first-female-veterans-housing-unit/>. SCI-Phoenix officially opened in March 2019 and is the 5th VSU to open in the Commonwealth. Mr. Rich Podguski provided an update on the Allegheny County Veteran Reentry Program. They have been working with the Allegheny County Veteran Court to look at the population of Veterans who are currently incarcerated who are returning to Allegheny County to see if there is a way to leverage the resources that the county provides through the problem-solving courts. They conducted analysis to determine the project scope by first identifying minimum dates from 12/2018 to 12/2019 which is the earliest possible release for those individuals (there are 33 in Allegheny County). 15 of those 33 have maximum dates of 2019 to 2021. So, they are looking at an amount of 15 to 33 potential individuals returning. 10 of those are currently in the VSU at SCI-Mercer, 3 with max dates of 2019. This scope is a minimal number of individuals returning and would not have a large impact on the services available in Allegheny County. Next steps are to set up additional meetings with county

officials to set up what the process would look like, determine the level of Department of Corrections, PA Board of Probation and Parole, and Allegheny County Veterans Court involvement would be, what services are needed and available, and speak with inmates at SCI-Mercer who will be making that transition to determine their level of interest in the pilot reentry program.

Questions/Comments: Maj. Gen. (Ret) Eric Weller asked about the recidivism rates of those coming out of the VSUs and Mr. Yoder explained that because the VSUs are only in their fourth year, he does not feel comfortable providing percentages until after the fifth year. He is looking forward to sharing the information once the supported statistics will be available.

Mr. Ryan Yoder shared some updates from the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts. So far in 2019 there has been a 25% increase in the number of Veterans Court in the Commonwealth. New treatment courts include Armstrong, Lycoming, Lebanon, Indiana, and Westmoreland counties. Data shows that there have been 196 successful graduates in 2017. More data can be located at <http://www.pacourts.us/news-and-statistics/research-and-statistics/>. Some other upcoming events the AOPC is participating in or hosting are:

-Statewide Veteran Treatment Court strategic planning will be conducted by the Center for Court Innovation in 2019

-Annual Problem-Solving Court Coordinators Symposium will be May 6-8 in Hershey, PA

-PA Veteran Courts annual event at Widener Commonwealth Law School in September 2019

-2nd Annual Veterans Justice Outreach Workshop will be November 1, 2019

-Veteran Court Volunteer Mentor Bootcamp in September 2019

- **Office of Administration/Information Technology Committee:** Ms. Sandra Patterson, Chair provided the council with updated statistics on the Veterans Registry. In 2018, there were 6,384 new registrants to the Registry. As of, February 7, 2019 there are now 19,128 registrants. Reporting has been improved so the committee is confident in these numbers. The Governor's Office is looking at an initiative for online voter registration on agencies' websites and have targeted the Veteran Registry to be an area where online voter registration can also be facilitated. The committee is working with the vendor to enable registrants to click to register to vote, so that their information would then be sent directly to the Department of State and register them to vote.

Questions/Comments: None at this time

- **Suicide Prevention-Peer (SPPEER) Committee:** Dr. Angela Keen from VISN4, summarized the VA's most comprehensive report on Veteran suicide. She noted that the data is national death data, not the VA's and was released in September 2018. The report indicated that from 2015 to 2016 overall Veteran suicide count has decreased from 6,281 to 6,079 deaths, however the 20 per day rate in 2016 has remained accurate and there is still a lot of work to do. The frequency of firearm use in these deaths is high; the hypothesis is that Veterans are comfortable with firearms and most own personal firearms. The importance of this is that firearms are of the most lethal means of attempted suicide. In 2016 the rates of suicides were highest among Veterans ages 18-34, but the number of suicide deaths among 55 and older accounted for 58.1%

in 2016. The rate of suicide among Veterans receiving Veteran Health Administration is increasing at a slower pace than the rate of suicide among Veterans who did not. Of the 20 suicides per day, only about 6 of that are receiving VA care and 14 are not. Female Veterans are almost twice as likely to die by suicide as non-Veteran females. Male Veteran suicide is 1.4 times higher as compared to non-Veteran men. The national trends are very similar to what we see here in the Commonwealth. Please see the power point presentation for visual graphs. Currently the VA is creating new partnerships to involve peers, family members, state, and community partners to identify those at risk, expanding 24/7 support with the Veterans Crisis Line, and promoting awareness to the community. REACH VET (Recovery Engagement and Coordination for Health – Veterans Enhanced Treatment) is a predictive program being launched to identify Veterans who may be at risk for suicide by using statistical predictors. They are expanding access to mental health care and partnering with the Department of Defense and Homeland Security to support Veterans during their transition from military to civilian life. This is helpful because the VA does not encounter all Veterans and suicide is a multifaceted problem.

Mr. Fred Nardei presented on the VA Mission Act of 2018 which has the purpose “to establish a permanent community care program for veterans, to establish a commission for the purpose of making recommendations regarding the modernization or realignment of facilities of the Veterans Health Administration, to improve construction of the Department of Veterans Affairs, to make certain improvements in the laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs relating to the home loan program of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.” The entire Act can be found at <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/2372/text>. Mr. Rick Hamp gave an overview of the State Suicide Prevention Plan and explained that it is nested within the goals of the VA Mission Act of 2018. Mr. Fred Nardei further described Section 506 of the Mission Act which entails guidelines on personnel, program timeframe, selection of locations, and other considerations.

Mr. Mark Todero provided an overview of what resources are available to current service members with State Military Family Support and clarified that these services are also available to Veterans. There are Family Assistance Center Specialists and Family Readiness Support Assistants who are the first line of communicators to military families in connecting them with tools, skills, and services they may need. Transition Assistance Advisors (TAAs) provide information on benefits and services to military personnel transitioning out of the military. The TAAs are connected to the Federal VA, PA DMVA, and the National Guard Service member assistance programs. These resources are available to help reduce the attributing factors to suicide for our PA National Guard service members. Pennsylvania has lost 68 National Guard service members to suicide since 2003, the highest of any National Guard.

Mr. Rick Hamp highlighted that round 2 of the Warm Hand Off Opioid Survivor Seminar on various dates and locations this year. QPR (Question Persuade Refer) Instructor Training was on March 15, 2019 in Harrisburg, PA, sponsored by Prevent Suicide PA.

4. New Business:

Maj. Gen. (Ret) Eric Weller stated that with all the work everyone is doing, the way to tie it all together is by the Regionalization Plan. Mr. Joel Mutschler gave an update on DMVA’s Regionalization Outreach Project Plan. The intent is to create and promote organized access to information, resources, and funding. Key elements have been identified, the project charter and scope have been completed, a breakdown of structure, and risk assessment have been finalized.

Within DMVA a project manager has been hired and Veteran Service Officers have been reassigned.

Questions/Comments: Ms. Donna Tilley-Hess informed the group that the PA Cares Training Summit will be held on May 22, 2019 at the Comfort Inn Lancaster North. Registration is required through www.train.org/pa use course ID 'PA-EBH'. Please call 717-510-8563 for online registration assistance.

5. Next Meeting Date:

Wednesday, May 15, 2019 from 1:00PM to 3:00PM, at Arrowhead's Community Club, Fort Indiantown Gap. *Location subject to change*

6. Adjournment:

The meeting was adjourned at 3:10PM

The minutes of this meeting are respectfully submitted by: Crystal Petery, Administrative Officer, OVA