

State Veterans Commission Meeting Minutes

April 6, 2018
09:58 AM to 11:51 AM
Arrowheads Community Club, FTIG
Annville, PA 17003

Call to Order **Chairman Edgar Burris**

The Pennsylvania State Veterans' Commission (SVC) meeting was called to order at 09:58 AM by Chairman Edgar Burris.

Invocation and Pledge of Allegiance

The meeting was opened with an invocation by Chairman Burris and recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance led by Vice-Chairman Sam Petrovich.

Commission Introductions

Maj Gen Anthony Carrelli	The Adjutant General
Chairman Edgar Burris	Chairman, State Veterans' Commission
Maj Gen (Ret) Eric Weller	Deputy Adjutant General for Veterans Affairs
Mr. John Pliska	Executive Director, AMVETS
Mr. Paul Foresman	Commander, AMVETS
Mr. Dwight Fuhrman	Commander, Veterans of Foreign Wars
Mr. Edward Hanke	Commander, Disabled American Veterans
Mr. Samuel Petrovich	Adjutant, Disabled American Veterans/SVC Vice Chairman
Mr. Neil Appleby	President, Blinded Veterans Association
Mr. Henry Desrosiers	President, County Directors for Veterans Affairs Association
Mr. Harold Cooney	President, Military Officers Association of America
Mr. Thomas Haberkorn	Commander, Vietnam Veterans of America
Mr. Chris Fidler	Representative, Keystone Paralyzed Veterans of America
Mr. William Kelley	Representative, Korean War Veterans
Mr. Charles "Chuck" Jackson	Designee, Military Order of the Purple Heart
Mr. Kit Watson	Adjutant, American Legion
Mr. Paul Kennedy	Commander, American Legion
Ms. Constance Snavelly	Member at Large
Mr. James Powell	Designee, Marine Corps League
Mr. John Cyprian	Member at Large
Mr. John Brenner	Member at Large

Others Present

David Cowgill	VISN 4
Paul DeVincenzo	American Legion
Belinda Albright	Northumberland County Veterans Affairs
Tony Difrancesco	Dauphin County Veterans Affairs
Brian Querry	Centre County Veterans Affairs
Robert Cudworth	Military Officers Association of America
Keith Beebe	Military Officers Association of America
William Bechdel	Clinton County Veterans Affairs
Kenneth Walters	KPVA

Bruce Foster	American Legion
James Vollrath	American Legion
Robert Gray	MOAA
Rich Hudzinski	Vietnam Veterans of America
Matt Zamosky	PACDVA
David Cummiskey	USDOL-VETS
Tom Minchin	Marine Corps League
Nate Silcox	Senate
Kory Auch	OA
Sec. Minnich	OA
Nancy Burris	
Jodi Zucco	Office of Attorney General
Eugene Bell	Naval Enlisted Reserve Association
David Wood	Director of Joint Staff - PAARNG
Harry Buchanan	Command Sergeant Major - PANG
Joan Nissley	DMVA-Public Affairs
Len Cowitch	DMVA-CCO
Elizabeth Pettis	DMVA-CCO
Rick Hamp	DMVA-OVA
Andrew Ruscavage	DMVA-BVH
Joel Mutschler	DMVA-PPL
Gilbert Durand	DMVA-PPL
Brian Natali	DMVA-OVA
Chip Gilliland	DMVA-OVA
Janette Krolczyk	DMVA-OVA
Reminder	Chairman Burris
-Chairman Burris reminded the members to give Executive Secretary (Janette Krolczyk) information about SVC replacements, so everything will be in place when they take office.	
Approval of the February 2, 2018 Meeting Minutes	
Motion: Mr. John Pliska made a motion to approve the minutes as distributed.	
Second: Mr. Paul Kennedy seconded the motion.	
The body agreed, motion carried.	
Military Update	Major General Anthony Carrelli
-General Carrelli updated the group that 801 guardsmen have been deployed as of April 6, 2018. He added that President Trump stated that he wants National Guard troops to guard the southwest boarder of the US. PA has not been contacted yet, but that possibility exists.	
-General Carrelli spoke of the rough weather the state experienced in March, leading the National Guard to go on active duty three different times for snow during that month.	
-General Carrelli referenced the Wall of Faces project and urged everyone to assist in finding the last batch of 34 photos that are still needed to finish the project.	
VISN 4	Mr. David Cowgill
-Mr. Cowgill briefed on the VISN4 annual report. This report is posted on the VISN4 website: visn4.va.gov, and includes a wealth of information covering topics like major accomplishments, new programs, new facilities, staff changes, etc. Each of the nine local facilities also must produce an annual report and newsletter, which is also linked to the VISN4 website.	
-With regard to "Care," 97% of appointments were taken care of within 90 days. The facilities conducted 1.2 million appointments, and the average wait time is about 3.9 days.	

-Mr. Cowgill discussed the “Trust in Care” survey that goes out to patients every few weeks and explained that the areas of effectiveness, ease, emotion and trust are assessed. The goal is to have 90% of Veterans respond that they agree or strongly agree with the four statements. Specialty-care patients encompass the area where there is still more work to do in the Veterans Trust categories.

-Currently 92% of inpatients trust VISN4 with their commitment to Veterans, which is an improvement over the last fiscal year, along with 81% of outpatients, which is another improvement over last fiscal year. 78% of specialty-care patients trust VISN4 to fulfill their commitment to Veterans, which is a slight improvement.

-Provider agreements are constantly being expanded to improve access to healthcare for Veterans, and over 260 new agreements have been added since the beginning of the fiscal year in October.

-VA national launched a welcome kit, which is a brief guide, that includes instructions, points of contact for facilities and some benefit information. This kit will be sent to all separating servicemen and women as part of the “welcome home” process.

-The VA is rolling out a national initiative called VETEXT, where Veterans will get text reminders about their appointments. Backup initiatives are being developed for individuals who may not use cell phones. At the time of the initial rollout, clinic names will not be included in the messages, but that capability will be updated shortly after the program starts. Replying STOP to the messages will opt out any Veteran from the program, if they choose not to utilize it.

-General Weller asked to speak with Mr. Cowgill after the meeting, along with the DAV representatives, regarding some transportation issues that were identified. Mr. Cowgill was happy to comply.

-Mr. John Brenner asked for any information regarding the privatization of VA Healthcare.

-Mr. Cowgill responded by stating that he doesn’t know any more than the members do at this point. He continued to say that he can’t speak for Dr. Adelman, but his guess was that everyone would be updated at about the same time.

-Mr. Bruce Foster asked to verify the spelling of VETEXT.

OLD BUSINESS

DMVA Chief Counsel **Ms. Elizabeth Pettis**

-Chairman Burris introduced the new Chief Counsel, Ms. Pettis.

-Ms. Pettis stated that she is an Army Veteran, serving for 10 years. She also mentioned that she was not a JAG. Ms. Pettis has worked for a Fortune 100 company, a large law firm and several state agencies, and concluded by saying that she and her staff are available for any questions or concerns.

-General Carrelli added that the DMVA is very lucky to have Ms. Pettis on the team. She brings skill to the table and her experience working in the Governors Chief Counsel office adds great knowledge and understanding to our agency.

DMVA Policy, Planning & Legislative Affairs **Mr. Joel Mutschler**

-Mr. Mutschler stated that the PPL update was sent to the members in the read ahead packet and added that Legislative Committee chairman and Chairman Burris received an update last week. One new development on the federal side was that SB 324, which gives access to adult day health care has been enacted and is now public law 115-159.

DMVA Bureau of State Veterans Homes **Mr. Andrew Ruscavage**

-Mr. Ruscavage briefed that April is volunteer appreciation month, and flyers about the Homes volunteer events have been passed out. He encouraged everyone to attend the events and thank the volunteers that contribute their valuable time to the Veterans. Last year alone, there was over 83,000 volunteer hours accumulated at the Homes.

-Homes Week will be from June 10-16 and many events are listed on the flyers that were passed out.

-Annual Fishing Tournament with General Carrelli will be June 19 at the Dauphin County Anglers Association on Clarks Creek.

-General Wood asked about any registration process that may be needed to attend the events. Mr. Ruscavage said that individuals can drop in, or call ahead to the various Homes, especially if a group will be attending.

Approval of Programs Reports

Motion: Mr. Ed Hanke made a motion to approve the programs reports as presented in the read ahead.	
Second: Mr. James Powell seconded the motion.	
The body agreed, motion carried.	
DMVA Services & Programs	Mr. Brian Natali
-Mr. Natali stated that all program materials were provided as part of the read ahead and asked for any questions.	
DMVA Outreach & Reintegration	Mr. Chip Gilliland
-Mr. Gilliland stated that all O & R information was provided as part of the read ahead and asked for any questions.	
SVC Bylaw Committee	Mr. Sam Petrovich
-Mr. Petrovich briefed that his committee met twice since the last SVC meeting in February. He stated that goals have been outlined and the direction of the committee is clear. Another meeting is scheduled for mid-May and the intention would be to send out a copy of proposed bylaws for review and potentially take a vote at the June SVC meeting.	
SVC Act 66 Committee	Mr. Ed Hanke
-Mr. Hanke briefed that his committee met twice so far, and many details are being looked at. Mr. Hanke stated that most of the reports he sees are compiled and would like to have them broken down by the different service organizations.	
-Chairman Burris asked General Carrelli if the legislators are looking at approving what the Governor submitted for Act 66.	
-General Carrelli stated that the budget is not complete. The House cut many things out of the proposed budget line items, and the Senate has not acted yet. Negotiations are to come but many talks with the legislators are planned and General Carrelli encouraged everyone to get involved and let the legislators know what Veterans need.	
-Mr. Hudzinski asked about the \$750,000 that was put back into the budget and inquired as to what that would be allotted for.	
-General Carrelli stated that money was a legislative add which would be controlled by Senator Browne's office, and earmarked for New Vitae. General Carrelli went on to say that he does not know the official status or the complete details.	
-Mr. Brenner referenced last year's budget cut and asked about the impact of the budget on the Homes for this budget season.	
-General Carrelli stated that the approach from downtown was to start with last year's budget and add 1%. Although the department survived the previous cut, 1% extra will not carry through and take care of the expenses that were postponed, the increased cost of medicines and utilities, testing for Legionella, new inspections, etc. General Carrelli stated that these items all cost additional money. Initially, these "additional expenses" were listed as line items so the budget office would understand the changes in costs from last year in addition to allowing the department to account for all the required functions that need to be performed. After acknowledging these line items would be accepted and paid for, the House essentially zeroed those items out, stating that last year's budget numbers would be the starting point, and then add 1%.	
-General Carrelli's strategy has been to show the legislators what is going to be cut when a subsequent cut in funding occurs. He gave the example that if a million dollars is cut from the budget, then 50 Veterans would be displaced from the Homes. General Carrelli ensures that the legislators understand the direct correlation between cuts in funding and the personal impacts or repercussions.	
-Mr. Brenner stated that last year, the Veterans' Homes money and the Act 66 money both came from the VA budget. His concern was competing against the Homes to obtain funds for Act 66.	
-General Carrelli agreed that when conversations occur downtown, it's important not to only say one thing. Showing how everything connects is key and looking for outside funding is important because just trading program money inside won't fix the problem.	

-General Weller commented on the \$750,000 being added as a budget line item. He called upon the individuals in the room, especially the ones who already have a good relationship with the legislators, to add to the conversation. The DMVA is one entity but others need to speak up and have their voices be heard also.

-General Carrelli ended by stating everyone should remember that no new money is being added to the budget. The extra money that may be added to the budget, must come from another agency. Although everyone present is concerned with DMVA issues, other agencies also need those resources, so the legislators have a difficult job in making those decisions.

SVC RETX Committee

Mr. Henry Desrosiers

-Mr. Henry Desrosiers referenced the last SVC meeting, where a motion was passed to have a letter drafted for a survey of the RETX program. Mr. Haberkorn and Mr. Hudzinski drafted the letter, sent it to Mr. Desrosiers who then forwarded it to the committee members. After a minor correction, Mr. Desrosiers contacted Ms. Lisa Shaeffer, who works for CCAP.

Motion: Mr. Henry Desrosiers made a motion to have the drafted letter approved by the commission and then sent to CCAP for dissemination to the taxing authorities.

Second: Mr. John Brenner seconded the motion.

The body agreed, motion carried.

OA Briefing

Secretary Minnich

-Secretary Minnich briefed about SB 1037 regarding Veterans Preference.

-Secretary Minnich clarified some details about the bill. She mentioned that the military code will not be changed or impacted by the bill and that Veterans will not be negatively impacted from a hiring perspective. All agencies must follow the military code, and it is applied to both civil service positions and non-civil service positions.

-One thing ruled out by the Office of Administration was the centralization of Veterans Preference to include consistency.

-Secretary Minnich stated that no Governor has the ability to change or diminish the merit-covered positions in the Commonwealth.

-The law also requires the publication of regulations, which goes through the ERC process, which is a two-year process, and those regulations are what guides the policy.

-Vacancy-based hiring began in April of 2017 for non-civil service positions. Shared Service was implemented in July of 2017. A new website was utilized to attract talent, and the department looked at standardizing processes for efficiencies.

-Through all these implementations, the recruit-to-hire timeframes have been improved, bringing the average to about 45 days on the non-civil service side.

-These changes have helped to modernize the system for the agencies, applicants and citizens being served, while driving down costs.

-The goal of the Shared Services initiative is to make sure that services are being provided in a way that follows the law and is very cost effective and efficient for the agencies, so the money goes to where it is truly needed.

-General Carrelli thanked Secretary Minnich for coming to the meeting and speaking about Veterans Preference.

-General Carrelli mentioned that Senator Vulakovich supports the bill and is one of the lead advocates for Veterans.

-General Carrelli explained that more Veterans will have access to a face-to-face interview with the Veterans Preference, which is a much more flexible system.

-Mr. Eugene Bell shared his military history and previous job changes, explaining how difficult is to work with the state system.

-Secretary Minnich responded by saying that a major point the department has actively tried to change is the application process, so when someone applies for a job, that individual knows an actual position is available. The previous system involved getting onto a list, but no one knew how many positions were available, if any, and there was no way of knowing how long it would be until a position opened.

-Chairman Burris thanked Secretary Minnich for taking time to brief the Commission.	
SVC Legislative Committee	Mr. Paul Kennedy
<p>-Mr. Paul Kennedy deferred to Mr. Keith Beebe. Mr. Beebe stated the Legislative Committee of the PWVC met yesterday to discuss SB 1037 and civil service reform.</p> <p>-Mr. Beebe explained that an extensive study was conducted, looking at the Office of Administration and the Civil Service Commission. The results of the survey determined that the PWVC would like the General Assembly to more carefully examine the 1037 bill.</p> <p>-Mr. Beebe explained that the PWVC will be testifying at the Senate Hearing coming up on April 16th and will be suggesting some alternatives to the legislation.</p> <p>-Mr. Beebe stated he has established an Act 66 team to act as advocates for additional funding for outreach.</p> <p>-Mr. Beebe discussed Post-Conviction Review, which looks at incarcerated Veterans in the PA Corrections system to determine if they have PTSD or TBI. Extensive survey information has been supplied to the Senate and House Judiciary Committees which may assist in establishing legislation on this issue.</p>	
SVC Pensions & Relief/Grave Marking/State Military Cemetery Committee	Mr. John Brenner
<p>-Mr. John Brenner stated that meetings have occurred for the committee and a few bills are of interest and deferred to Mr. Chris Fidler.</p> <p>-Mr. Chris Fidler spoke about the paralyzed, amputee and blinded Veteran disability pension. He explained that when the pension started in 1975, the payment was \$100 a month, and then increased to \$150 a month in 1999. With some research on the cost of living differences, Mr. Fidler calculated that an updated pension payment should be just over \$200. The committee recommends support of HB 304, which would amend Title 51 in the area of pensions and benefits and increase the monthly payment from \$150 to \$200.</p>	
Motion: Mr. Brenner made a motion for the Commission to send a letter of support for HB 304.	
Second: Mr. Fidler seconded the motion.	
The body agreed, motion carried.	
<p>-Mr. Brenner deferred to Mr. Natali to discuss HB 980 which deals with Veterans Disability Income.</p> <p>-Mr. Natali briefed on how HB 980 would impact property tax as well as financial need. This bill would remove the requirement to include Veterans Disability Income. It would also apply the same change to the Educational Gratuity Program.</p> <p>-Mr. Henry Desrosiers mentioned that if this bill eliminates VA compensation, the RETX program would not have to look at household income, which would be much easier. If household income is being looked at, the RETX program would lose 584 Veterans.</p>	
Motion: Mr. Brenner made a motion for the Commission to support HB 980.	
Second: Mr. Desrosiers seconded the motion.	
The body agreed, motion carried.	
<p>-Mr. Brenner spoke about the Veterans Temporary Assistance Program and Mr. Natali clarified that all donations can be made out to the Veterans Trust Fund. A spending authority is set at the beginning of the fiscal year, which is why things need to be adjusted, depending on the spending limit that is set. If more donations are made, a higher spending authority will be possible.</p> <p>-Mr. Natali stated that the Veterans Trust Fund is now Chapter 85.</p> <p>-General Carrelli explained that all donations can go into the Veterans Trust Fund and then many things are funded with grants that come out of the VTF. The balance of the fund is looked at every year and determinations are made for how much can be spent in various areas.</p> <p>-Mr. Brenner discussed the Memorial fund and the grave markers. He stated that many organizations are looking for the markers and with the help of Mr. Desrosiers, the committee now has a great resource of where to get markers for all the wars.</p>	
NEW BUSINESS	
-Regarding the SVC position on Veteran's Preference, Mr. Sam Petrovich suggested that the Commission table the vote, and not take a position until after the hearing at the capitol regarding SB 1037.	
Motion: Mr. Paul Kennedy made the motion to table the vote.	

Second: Mr. Chuck Jackson seconded the motion.	
-Mr. Jim Powell asked for General Carrelli's thoughts on postponing the vote.	
-General Carrelli asked Mr. Nate Silcox if there was still an opportunity for changes to the bill.	
-Mr. Nate Silcox stated that the hearing will be on Monday, April 16 at 11:00am in Hearing Room 1 of the North Office Building. Input will be heard, and Mr. Silcox doesn't believe the current bill will be the final product.	
-General Carrelli stated that if there will be an opportunity for changes, or for voices to be heard, there would be no problem with putting off the vote until after the hearing.	
The body agreed, motion carried.	
Hall of Fame Nomination	
Motion: Mr. John Cyprian made the motion to induct Donald R. Lobaugh into the Hall of Fame.	
Second: Mr. John Brenner seconded the motion.	
The body agreed, motion carried.	
Good of the Order/Announcements	
-Mr. Robert Cudworth stated that the term "bylaws" should be written as one word.	
-Mr. Haberkorn stated that Hollidaysburg Veterans Home is located in Blair County.	
-Ms. Constance Snavely wanted to announce the invitation for May 19 th (Armed Forces Day) for everyone to join in to the bugles across America. At 11:00am across America, TAPS will sound in an echo form in National Cemeteries, which will include Fort Indiantown Gap. Following TAPS will be a trumpet choir in the Memorial.	
-Mr. Silcox reminded everyone that The Wall that Heals will be coming to the Capitol from May 9-13. This is the Vietnam War Memorial replica and will be outside the North Office Building. Former Governor Tom Ridge will be the keynote speaker for the opening event on May 9 th .	
Service Update – The American Legion	Mr. Paul Kennedy
-Mr. Paul Kennedy thanked General Carrelli for attending the oratorical contest at the Capitol being put on by The American Legion and for being the guest speaker at the National Commanders Tour.	
-Mr. Kennedy also stated that this is the 100 th anniversary of The American Legion and a parade and celebration is set for July in Harrisburg.	
Service Update – Military Order of the Purple Heart	Mr. Chuck Jackson
-Mr. Chuck Jackson began by stating that MOPH was originally chartered by congress in 1932 and Pennsylvania has about 2,500 members spread through 13 chapters. The Department of Pennsylvania will pay the lifetime membership fees for all Pennsylvania Purple Heart recipients. The organization has a two-year command and three offices in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Bedford. They are funded by the Purple Heart Service Foundation. If a chapter is in good standing, they each get a \$5,000 grant which generally must go to Veterans in State Homes, VA facilities or private facilities.	
-Mr. Jackson went on to say that the organization donates to non-profits in the Commonwealth and has a \$2,000/year scholarship for four years for any Purple Heart Veteran or family member. The annual convention will be in Lewisburg from July 5-6 th .	
Service Update – Catholic War Vets	Mr. William Wright
-Mr. William Wright was not in attendance.	
Service Update – Blinded Veterans Association	Mr. Neil Appleby
-Mr. Neil Appleby started with a joke before briefing. He thanked General Carrelli about recognizing the Vietnam anniversary and thanked Mr. Natali for forwarding the birthday greeting for the Blinded Veterans Association.	
-Mr. Appleby shared that the BVA started shortly after WWII by a group of soldiers in rehab. Mr. Appleby himself has been a member since 1972 and has been in leadership roles since 1982, both at the state and national levels.	

-Mr. Appleby has about 600 names on the Blinded Veterans List, 400 of which are active members. He has reached out to the remaining 200 individuals by sending them applications to hopefully attract new members to the organization.

-Mr. Appleby stated that BVA wanted to start a blind center in Lebanon, but they didn't have the money to accomplish that project from scratch. He explained that the bureau gave the organization \$250,000 staff to get credentialed, so they could start a VISOR (Visually Impaired Services Outpatient Rehabilitation) program. He is happy to report that they are celebrating 18 years with their VISOR program.

-Mr. Appleby concluded with sharing information about the different types of blindness, including a vision chart to show what various afflictions look like. He also mentioned that although the read ahead material presents a challenge, he works through the issue by using computer software that can either enlarge the type or read the information to him.

Discussion Topic for Next Meeting

-Chairman Burriss stated that Mr. Harold Cooney of MOAA will be presenting the discussion topic for the next meeting. Mr. Cooney wasn't supposed to be at the April meeting, and asked for an extension to ensure everything would be prepared for June 1st.

-Chairman Burriss stated that at the June meeting, there are 28 Civil War Medal of Honor recipients who will be nominated for the Hall of Fame.

-Mr. Appleby questioned the location of the inductees.

-Mr. Ruscavage clarified that the nominations will be discussed at the Hollidaysburg Veterans Home for the June meeting, but the inductees are coming through the Southeastern Veterans Center.

Next Meeting

Friday, June 1, 2018
Hollidaysburg Veterans Home
500 Municipal Drive
Hollidaysburg (Duncansville), PA 16648

Adjournment

Chairman Burriss adjourned the meeting at 11:51 AM.

The minutes of this meeting are respectfully submitted by:

Maj Gen (Ret) Eric G. Weller
Deputy Adjutant General
Veterans' Affairs