

**PENNSYLVANIA STATE VETERANS' COMMISSION MEETING
ARROWHEADS COMMUNITY CLUB
FORT INDIANTOWN GAP
ANNVILLE, PA 17003-5002**

Friday, December 5, 2014

1. **CALL TO ORDER:** The State Veterans' Commission (SVC) meeting was called to order at 10:00 am 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. **THE ADJUTANT GENERAL UPDATE:** MG Craig provided an update briefing on the following topics:
 - Current PA Army and Air National Guard mobilization and total deployments
 - Future PA Army and Air National Guard mobilization and total deployments
 - Veterans' Trust Fund Revenue and Disbursements
 - Act 66 Claims, Compensation, Pension and Recovery Summary
 - Outreach Engagements
5. **VISN 4 UPDATE:** Mr. Gary Devansky briefed the following information:
 - **Leadership Changes:**
 - Erie – David Cord began serving as the Director of the Erie VA Medical Center on November 17. Mr. Cord is an Air Force Veteran and experienced VA leader
 - Pittsburgh – VA Pittsburgh is recruiting for a new deputy director; Barb Forsha is currently serving in that capacity. They will soon begin recruitment for a new director; Dr. David Macpherson continues to serve in the interim
 - VISN 4 – I continue to serve as the Interim Network Director. There is no word yet on a permanent replacement. Currently, Elizabeth Helsel is filling in as the Director of Coatesville in my absence
 - **Workload Update:**
 - In fiscal year 2014, VISN 4 treated 320,512 unique Veterans and conducted 3,567,597 outpatient visits.
 - **Around the Network:**
 - On November 3rd, the Erie VA opened the newly relocated Ashtabula community-based outpatient clinic.

- On November 10th, we celebrated the opening of a new, expanded surgical center at the Lebanon VA Medical Center.
- On November 12, The Jewish Healthcare Foundation, in partnership with The Fine Foundation, announced the winning teams for the 2014 Fine Award for Teamwork Excellence in Health Care. This award, open to all western Pennsylvania health care providers, encourages essential teamwork in developing systems, tools, and programs that better serve patients and families by spotlighting those who have made a difference.
- VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System took home a platinum award for revamped policies and procedures for anesthesia, surgery, and recovery for joint replacement patients, which is the third Fine award for VAPHS.
- On November 17th, the Philadelphia VA opened a new mental health clinic for their CHROME team on the 2nd floor.
- **Town Hall Meetings:**
 - Each VA facility will now hold quarterly town hall meetings for Veterans and all stakeholders. The schedule is posted on the VISN 4 website, www.visn4.va.gov. Please try to attend when you can, and encourage your colleagues and Veterans to attend.
- **Choice Program**
 - The Veterans Choice Program is scheduled to operate for 3 years or until the \$10 billion is exhausted. When 75% of the fund is exhausted, VA will notify Congress, who will decide if it is renewed or not.
 - All Veterans who were enrolled as of August 1st and new enrollees within five years of separation will receive a Veterans Choice Card by the end of next month. Not all Veterans who receive the Card will be able to participate in the Veterans Choice Program right away, but may be eligible down the road.
 - To use the card, Veterans must be unable to schedule a VA appointment within 30 days of their preferred date or the clinically appropriate date identified by a VA provider. Or the Veteran must live more than 40 miles from the closest VA facility, including a community-based outpatient clinic.
 - This is separate from VA's previously existing program providing Veterans care outside of the VA system. The Veterans Choice Program website, www.va.gov/opa/choiceact, has a wealth of helpful information.
- **Affordable Care Act (ACA):**
 - The Affordable Care Act open enrollment season will end on February 15th. Veterans who are enrolled in the VA health care system already meet the minimum essential coverage standards set by ACA and don't need to take any further action.
 - Veterans who are not enrolled can enroll at any time. They also can explore the Health Insurance Marketplace for coverage for themselves or their families. VA's ACA website,

www.va.gov/aca, informs Veterans, beneficiaries and their family members how this Act affects them and their options.

- **MyVA:**

- On November 10, VA Secretary Robert McDonald made an announcement regarding his reorganization plans for the Department. The primary goal of these plans, which are collectively entitled "MyVA," is to make VA easier to navigate for Veterans. Soon, VA will begin implementing changes in phases, to better structure our organization to meet Veteran needs.
- One of the changes proposed is the establishment of a national network of Community Veteran Advisory Councils to coordinate better service delivery with local, state and community partners. Please keep in mind that this is a long-term process and we are just beginning to plan how this will all unfold. As we move forward with these changes, your feedback, ideas and perspective will be invaluable.

- **Discussion:**

- Mr. Bruce Foster asked "Has the Priority Group System changed?" Mr. Devansky stated that it had not changed. Priorities will remain the same for eligibility.
- Mr. Appleby suggested that Mr. Devansky collect business cards from State Veterans Commission members and invite them to be present at the next monthly teleconference. Mr. Devansky acknowledged that this was a very good suggestion, and invited all members of the SVC to participate. Mr. Devansky also suggested that they might be able to make the minutes from the teleconferences available to members of the State Veterans Commission as well.
- Mr. Hudzinski asked if Mr. Devansky knew when a decision on the VISN 4 Director position would be made. Mr. Devansky stated that he did not know when a decision would be made.
- Mr. Getz questioned the veracity of the matter regarding treatment and services taking longer for Veterans choosing to go outside of network. Mr. Devansky stated that it depends on the area; but acknowledged that there was truth in the matter that Veterans do not necessarily receive faster / better service outside of the network.

6. **REVIEW AND APPROVAL OF MEETING MINUTES:** Minutes from the October 3, 2014 meeting were presented for approval. Mr. Michael Mescavage made a motion to accept the meeting minutes as presented. Ms. Jeannine Botta-Guth seconded the motion. The motion carried and the minutes were approved.

7. **OLD BUSINESS:**

- **State Veterans Homes Update:** Mr. Andrew Ruscavage provided an update briefing on the following information:
 - **State Veterans Homes Occupancy Statistics:**
 - ✓ Total State Occupancy – 92%
 - ✓ Total State Veterans' Homes Non-Veteran Census Percentage – 10%
 - ✓ State Veterans' Homes Nursing Care / Dementia Occupancy – 95%
 - ✓ State Veterans' Homes Personal Care / Domiciliary Occupancy – 79%
 - ✓ The occupancy percentage over the next eight months will be purposefully reduced to allow for two construction projects. One at the Southwestern Veterans Center (SWVC) and the other at the Southeast Veterans Center (SEVC).
 - **Construction Project – Southwest Veterans Center (SWVC):**
 - ✓ SWVC is replacing the flooring in the entire facility; to accomplish this project the residents will need to be displaced from the nursing units for up to one week at a time. To account for this movement of the skilled nursing residents SWVC will displace the Personal Care Unit (PCU) residents to the Holidaysburg Veterans Home (HVH) and Pennsylvania Soldiers and Sailors Home (PSSH) and/or another local private Personal Care Unit of the residents' choice.
 - ✓ The Bureau of Veterans Homes has begun notifying residents, families, advisory councils, regulatory agencies as well as legislators that the PCU at SWVC will be converted to a skilled nursing unit upon completion of the construction project. This will allow SWVC to care for a more acute population of Veterans.
 - ✓ Currently there are 31 Veterans on the waiting list for skilled nursing care at SWVC. The PCU residents will therefore be transferring permanently to other state veterans' homes and / or private facilities of choice. The transfers will begin as soon as residents decide on location. All transfers need to take place by January 16, 2015. The construction completion date is estimated to be August 8, 2015.
 - **Construction Project – Southeast Veterans Center (SEVC):**
 - ✓ A mold remediation project in Coates Hall will begin December 8, 2014, and as with SWVC, residents at SEVC will need to be displaced to accomplish the construction project.
 - ✓ Testing has been completed and a determination was made by professionals that the condition does not pose a risk to residents, staff, or visitors to the facility.
 - ✓ SEVC has accomplished the reduction in their PCU to allow for East and West sides of the fourth floor construction project. The third floor of Coates Hall which is currently

- vacant will be remediated then the residents from the second floor will relocate to the third floor.
- ✓ Upon completion of the construction project the Bureau of Veterans Homes will petition VA and Department of Health (DOH) for an increase of 54 skilled nursing beds (current skilled nursing wait list 89) for a total of 238 skilled beds at SEVC, allowing for the occupancy of both the third and second floors for the first time in over two years.
 - ✓ The construction completion date is estimated to be August 4, 2015.
 - **Licensure Status – Gino Merli Veterans Center (GMVC):**
 - ✓ GMVC- completed an annual DOH inspection on October 24, 2014 in which GMVC received 10 deficiencies. This was an improvement from the last annual inspection but not enough improvement for the DOH to lift the Provisional License for the facility. The Provisional license was extended for an additional six months.
 - ✓ GMVC has an approved Plan of Correction with DOH and as of December 1st 2014, the facility is awaiting the unannounced re-inspection, followed by another annual inspection for removal of provisional license.
 - ✓ The facility has their new Director of Nursing (DON) in place and she is affecting a positive change that has been noticed and commented on by DOH inspectors.
 - ✓ There are Staffing concerns at GMVC. The Assistant Director of Nursing (ADON) has resigned as of November 14, 2014. The Certified Registered Nurse Practitioner (CRNP) has resigned as of December 7, 2014. GMVC is currently conducting interviews to fill these vacant positions.
 - **Licensure Status – Southeast Veterans Center (SEVC):**
 - ✓ SEVC-completed their DOH re-inspection on October 23rd, 2014. SEVC cleared all deficiencies related to the DOH annual inspection including the deficiency SEVC received for the country kitchens in the new Community Living Center (CLC) that placed SEVC in jeopardy.
 - ✓ SEVC is now awaiting another DOH annual inspection to clear the provisional license; this inspection is to take place unannounced before February 15, 2015.
 - ✓ SEVC has completed all recent actions with regard to regulatory compliance with an Acting DON (our current ADON Erin Keough) and acting Commandant (current Business Manager Michael Spencer), the previous staff for these positions were removed or asked to resign in light of ongoing and recent deficient practices at SEVC.
 - ✓ The new DON, Ms. Debbie Mullane started on the November 17, 2014. She has been taking charge and directing the nursing department to new standards. The Commandant interviews have been completed and a selection has been made. The new Commandant Rohan Blackwood, will start on the January 5, 2015.
 - ✓ Mr. Blackwood comes to us from the Private sector, where he has worked as a Nursing Home Administrator. He brings experience and knowledge to the Commandant position and we expect great things from him and for SEVC.

▪ **Bureau of Veterans Homes New Hire:**

- ✓ Mr. Gene Mizdail has been hired as the Admission and Marketing Director for the Bureau of Veterans Homes.

- **Veterans' Programs Update:** Mr. Brian Natali presented the Veterans Programs Reports for approval "in total". The State Veterans Commission held a singular vote to encompass the following reports as presented:

- Veterans Emergency Assistance Report
- Veterans Temporary Assistance Report
- Blind Veterans' Pension Report
- Paralyzed Veterans' Pension Report
- Educational Gratuity Report
- Disabled Veterans' Real Estate Tax Exemption Program Report

- ✓ A motion was made by Mr. Michael Mescavage to approve the reports as presented. Mr. Michael Iacavazzi seconded the motion. The motion carried.

▪ **Disabled Veterans' Real Estate Tax Exemption Program - 5 Acre Rule:**

- ✓ The Real Estate Tax Exemption Program grants eligible Veterans exemption of all real estate taxes levied upon any building, occupied by that person as a principal dwelling, including up to five acres of land upon which it stands. In order to receive additional tax relief for acreage exceeding the allotted 5 acres; a Request for Waiver must be submitted and approved.
- ✓ The State Veterans Commission has a Standing Motion regarding the 5 Acre Rule. The standing motion ratifies a non-approval vote for all exemption requests exceeding the allotted 5 acres.
- ✓ Chairman Brenner called to uphold the Standing Motion. No objections were raised, the standing motion held.

- **Persian Gulf Bonus Program** – Mr. Natali provided an update report on the Persian Gulf Bonus Program – no vote required.

- **Military Family Assistance Program** – Mr. Natali provided an update report on the Military Family Assistance Program – no vote required.

8. **NEW BUSINESS:**

• **Presumptive Need – Disabled Veterans' Real Estate Tax Exemption Program:**

- Pennsylvania Consolidated Statutes, Title 51, § 8904 establishes that the State Veterans Commission shall fix uniform and equitable standards for determining the need for exemption from the payment of real estate taxes.
- Every two years, it is the duty of the State Veterans Commission to adjust the annual income level qualifying for the rebuttable presumption of need by an amount equal to the change in the Consumer Price Index in the preceding two years.

- In accordance with the statute, the new presumption of need amount was calculated. Mr. John Cyprian made a motion that the newly calculated amount be approved by the State Veterans Commission. Mr. Bruce Foster seconded the motion. The motion carried. Effective January 1, 2015, the presumptive need amount will become \$87,212.00.
- **Hall of Fame Nomination:**
 - A Gino J. Merli Veterans Center Hall of Fame nomination for Mr. John H. Richards was submitted to the Commission for a vote.
 - Ms. Jeannine Botta-Guth made a motion to approve the nomination. The motion was seconded by Mr. Michael Iacavazzi. The motion carried and the nomination was approved.
- **Priority Status on State Veterans Homes Waiting List:**
 - Mr. Neil Appleby entered a motion to give priority status to World War II Veterans on the Waiting List for State Veterans Homes.
 - Ms. Jeannine Botta Guth requested a modification be made to Mr. Appleby's motion to include priority status for Korean War Veterans as well as the World War II Veterans.
 - Mr. Dominic DiFrancesco seconded the motion to include Korean War Veterans.
 - Chairman Brenner called for a vote regarding the modification. The ayes carried unanimously; the modified motion carried. Korean War Veterans would be included in the motion for priority status on the waiting list.
 - Chairman Brenner then called for a vote to award priority status to both World War II and Korean War Veterans on the wait list for entry into State Veterans Homes. The ayes carried and priority status was awarded.
- **Briefing Packets for General Public:**
 - Mr. Neil Appleby made a motion that briefing packets be made available for members of the general public attending the State Veterans Commission meetings.
 - Mr. John Cyprian seconded the motion.
 - Chairman Brenner called for a vote. The ayes carried and the motion passed.
 - Mr. Gordon Sheriff maintained that this would create an increased time and workload burden upon the administrative support staff. He therefore officially submitted an opposing vote.
- **Request for Volunteers:**
 - Chairman Brenner asked for volunteers to work with Mr. Chip Gilliland to review Veterans Trust Fund Grant applications.
 - Mr. Chris Fidler and Mr. Louis Abramson volunteered to assist.

9. **GOOD OF THE ORDER / ANNOUNCEMENTS:**

- BG Beck played a Veterans Day video presentation from Secretary McDonald.
- Gordon Sheriff asked that everyone remember to please donate to the Toys for Tots campaign.
- Mr. Devansky informed Commission members that if they would like to be included in the monthly teleconference calls they should email David Cowgil and ask to be included on the list. His email address is David.Cowgil@va.gov
- Gordon Sheriff also informed Commission members that there is a need for more mentors within the Veterans Treatment Court. There is a shortage of mentors and there is a need for more people to get involved.

10. **TIME / LOCATION OF NEXT MEETING:**

Friday, February 6, 2015 at 10:00 am
Arrowheads Community Club
Fort Indiantown Gap
Annville, PA 17003

11. **ADJOURNMENT:** The meeting was adjourned at 11:33 am

12. **ROLL CALL:**

- Members Present:

Mr. John Brenner, Chairman, State Veterans Commission
Ms. Jeannine Botta Guth, Member at Large
Mr. Dominic DiFrancesco, Member at Large
Mr. Bruce Foster, Designee for Commander, The American Legion
Mr. Robert John, Designee for Adjutant, The American Legion
Mr. Michael Mescavage, Military Order of the Purple Heart
Mr. Louis Abramson, Commander, Jewish War Veterans
Mr. Michael Iacavazzi, Commander, Italian American War Veterans
Mr. Gordon Sheriff, Designee for Commandant, Marine Corps League
Mr. Bernie McDonald, Designee for Commander, AMVETS
Mr. Gary Smith, State Commander, Veterans of Foreign War
Mr. John Getz, Jr., State Adjutant, Veterans of Foreign War
Mr. Ray Greene, Commander, Disabled American Veterans
Mr. Samuel Petrovich, Adjutant, Disabled American Veterans
Mr. Neil Appleby, President, Blinded Veterans Association
Mr. John Cyprian, President, State Association of County Directors
Mr. Robert Gray, President, Military Officers Association of America
Mr. Thomas Haberkorn, President, Vietnam Veterans of America
Mr. Chris Fidler, Director, Keystone Paralyzed Veterans

- Members Absent:

Mr. Gerry Hawk, Vice Chairman, State Veterans Commission
Mr. Dennis Haas, Commander, American Legion
Mr. Kit Watson, Adjutant, American Legion
Mr. Donald McMaster, Commander, Catholic War Veterans
Mr. Harold Genneria, Commissioner Emeritus
Mr. Jeff Van Arsdale, Commander, AMVETS

- Others Present:

MG Wesley E. Craig - The Adjutant General
BG, USA, (Retired) Jerry G. Beck, Secretary, State Veterans Commission
Mr. Gary Devansky – Acting Network Director, VISN 4
Ms. Nicole Reigelman - Office of PA Attorney General
Mr. Michael Barrett – DMVA-CC
Mr. Andrew Ruscavage - DMVA- VA
Mr. Rick Hamp – DMVA-VA
Mr. Brian Natali - DMVA-VA
Ms. Joan Nissley – DMVA-PAO
Mr. Tom Cherry – DMVA-PAO
Ms. Sue Kenney – DMVA-VA
Mr. Rich Hudzinski - VVA, LVMAC
Mr. Charles Jackson, MOPH
Mr. Joe Spielbauer - PMCPD
Mr. Roger Snook – Snyder County VA
Ms. Belinda Albright – Northumberland County Director – VA
Mr. Henry Desrosiers – Carbon County VA
Mr. Donny Oster – TAL
Mr. Tim Cleveland - Tioga County Director
Ms. Colleen Washinger - Dauphin County VA
Ms. Brenda Zechman – Schuylkill County VA
Mr. Frank Homme - DAV
Mr. Anthony DiFrancesco, Dauphin County VA
Ms. Viola C. Hertzog, Lehigh County VA
Mr. David Sandman, VFW
Mr. Dave Johnston - VVA
Mr. Tom Minchin - MCL
Mr. Hank Fiola - MCL

The minutes of this meeting are respectfully submitted by:

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