

# State Veterans Commission

## Meeting Minutes

April 7, 2017  
 10:00 AM to 11:56AM  
 Arrowheads Community Club, FTIG  
 Annville, PA 17003

<b>Call to Order</b>	<b>Chairman John Brenner</b>
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The Pennsylvania State Veterans' Commission (SVC) meeting was called to order at 9:59AM by Chairman John Brenner.

### Invocation and Pledge of Allegiance

The meeting was opened with an invocation by Chairman Brenner and recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance led by Vice Chairman Kit Watson.

### Commission Introductions

Brig Gen Anthony Carrelli	The Adjutant General
Chairman John Brenner	State Veterans' Commission
Maj Gen (Ret) Eric Weller	Deputy Adjutant General for Veterans Affairs
Mr. John Pliska	Executive Director, AMVETS
Mr. Boyd "KC" Simpson	Commander, AMVETS
Mr. Thomas Brown	Commander, VFW
Mr. John Getz	Adjutant, VFW
Mr. Michael Iacavazzi	Commander, DAV
Mr. Samuel Petrovich	Adjutant, DAV
Mr. Neil Appleby	President, Blinded Veterans Association
Mr. Nicholas Taylor	Commander, Catholic War Veterans
Mr. Henry Desrosiers	President, County Directors for Veterans Affairs Association
Mr. Robert Cudworth	President, Military Officers Association of America
Mr. Rich Hudzinski	Designee, Vietnam Veterans of America
Mr. Chris Fidler	Representative, Keystone Paralyzed Veterans of America
Mr. James Powell	Designee, Marine Corps League
Mr. Jerry Frank	Commander, Jewish War Veterans
Mr. William Kelley	Representative, Korean War Veterans
Mr. Michael Mescavage	Commander, Military Order of the Purple Heart
Mr. Kit Watson	Adjutant, American Legion
Mr. Carl Olshefskie	Commander, American Legion
Ms. Constance Snavely	Member at Large
Mr. Edgar Burris	Member at Large
Mr. John Cyprian	Member at Large

### Others Present

Doug Etter	Representative, VISN 4
Belinda Albright	Northumberland County Veterans Affairs
Tim Cleveland	Tioga County Veterans Affairs
Colleen Washinger	Dauphin County Veterans Affairs
Tony DiFrancesco	Dauphin County Veterans Affairs
Brenda Zechman	Schuylkill County Veterans Affairs
Keith Beebe	PA War Veterans Council
Charles Jackson	Adjutant, Military Order of the Purple Heart

Bruce Foster	American Legion
Scott Sheely	PA Department of Agriculture
MerryAnn Olshefskie	
Nancy Burris	
William Wright	Catholic War Veterans
Warren Kimmel	Vietnam Veterans of America
Kenneth R. Walters	Keystone Paralyzed Veterans
Jodi Zucco	Office of Attorney General
Tom Minchin	Marine Corps League
BG David Wood	DMVA
Shannan Zerance	DMVA
Joel Mutschler	DMVA-PPL
Brian Natali	DMVA-OVA
Chip Gilliland	DMVA-OVA
Mike Barrett	DMVA-CCO
Joyce Gibson	DMVA-OVA
<b>Approval of the February 3, 2016 Meeting Minutes</b>	
<b>Motion:</b> Mr. John Pliska, AMVETS, made a motion to approve the minutes as distributed.	
<b>Second:</b> Mr. Nicholas Taylor, Catholic War Veterans, seconded the motion.	
The body agreed, motion carried.	
<b>Oath of Office</b>	<b>Major General (Ret) Eric Weller</b>
General Weller administered the Oath of Office to the following newly appointed Pennsylvania State Veterans' Commission members:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ms. Constance Snavelly, Member at Large</li> <li>• Mr. John Cyprian, Member at Large</li> <li>• Mr. Edgar Burris, Jr., Member at Large</li> </ul>	
<b>Military Update</b>	<b>Major General (Ret) Eric Weller</b>
General Weller briefed the Commission on current deployments, about 270, and the reason DMVA continues to provide military update. As all those deployed return with DD214's which makes them Veterans. Army and Air Reserves are being pressed more to become operations forces, therefore deployment levels will rise. Upon return, as Veterans, they may need our help or attention in relation to Veterans issues.	
<b>VISN 4</b>	<b>Mr. Doug Etter</b>
<b>Leadership:</b> Charles Thilges is serving as the interim director of the Altoona VAMC. Robert Callahan continues to serve as the interim director at Wilmington VAMC, in his absence, Margaret Wilson, serves as the acting director at Lebanon VAMC. Dr. Poonam Alaigh is serving as Acting Under Secretary for Health.	
<b>VISN 4 Access:</b> VISN 4 continues to provide nearly 98% of appointments in less than 30 days with an average wait time between 3 and 5 days. Medical centers continue to work with providers in their local communities and the Choice program to improve access to health care. They continue to re-earn Veterans trust by improving the Veteran Experience.	
<b>OTH Discharges:</b> Dr. David Shulkin, VA Secretary, announced that he intends to expand provisions for urgent mental health care needs to former service members with other than honorable discharges. He hopes to finalize this plan after meeting with Congress, Veterans Service Organizations and Department of Defense officials to determine the best way forward.	
<b>Volunteer Recognition Week:</b> VA Voluntary Service is one of the largest volunteer programs in the federal government. Last year in VISN 4, more than 4M dollars in gifts and donations was received and more than 4,000 volunteers donated more than 485,000 hours of time.	
<b>Questions/Comments:</b> Mr. Iacavazzi questioned why the suicide hotline transferred callers to a contractor. Mr. Etter responded that is to ensure every call is answered. Mr. Hudzinski asked for data regarding private sector and Veterans' Choice. Mr. Etter replied he doesn't see why not. Mr. Cyprian asked regarding the discharges if there was a policy in place to have VA Staff contact VSO to work on possibly upgrading the	

discharge? There is no current policy, Mr. Etter can take that information to leadership. Mr. Burris stated under the Choice Program providers are complaining they are not getting paid and bowing out of the system, do you see the provider number going down? VISN 4 is aware there are issues with payment, payment is the responsibility of the third party administrator and VISN 4 leaders are addressing. Chairman Brenner asked about Nurse Practitioners (NP) and the value they bring to the VA and what thoughts they have on the bills regarding NP's. Mr. Etter provided his personal opinion.

### OLD BUSINESS

#### DMVA Chief Counsel

Mr. Michael Barrett

Mr. Michael Barrett was available for questions or concerns.

#### DMVA Policy, Planning & Legislative Affairs

Mr. Dusty Durand

Mr. Dusty Durand briefed the Commission on the bills they are tracking; HB218 – Budget, Veterans' Memorial Trust Fund Bill (1HB, 1SB), PA Achievement and Veteran Service Award Bill, Global War on Terror Bonus Bill.

Real Estate Tax Exemption Program: A meeting took place with Senator Vulakovich and they've identified the changes that have to go through constitutional change vs. statutory amendment.

Military Record Discharge Repository: We've identified we need to get other PA state agencies to share their discharge documents with DMVA, rather than complete this through legislation we are doing it through policy.

Passed Resolutions: 5 April – Gold Star Wives Day, 6 April – WWI Centennial

Mr. Durand provided the results of the survey regarding female Veteran license plates.

**Questions/Comments:** Mr. Hudzinski asked for the bill numbers we are supporting for the Real Estate Tax Exemption Program. SB 389 & SB 390, both are sponsored by Senator Lisa Baker. Regarding the budget bill, General Weller stressed the impact of the budget cuts.

#### DMVA Public Affairs

Ms. Joan Nissley

Ms. Nissley briefed the past news releases. The Veterans' Registry is not just for Veterans, anyone who assists with Veterans are eligible. Please spread the word. Ms. Nissley provide a map of the current WOF needs.

**Questions/Comments:** Mr. Hudzinski questioned why a person needs to register to receive the DMVA Digest. Ms. Nissley informed responded they are trying to gather demographic and geographic data on Pennsylvania Veterans and those that care for them. Mr. Hudzinski asked if the DMVA Digest could be provided without registering? Ms. Nissley answered she would look into and get back to the commission.

#### DMVA Bureau of State Veterans Homes

Mr. Andrew Ruscavage

Mr. Ruscavage provided a brief overview of the current licensure status. Mr. Ruscavage highlighted the initiatives and construction projects at each home. SWVC has appealed the Provisional 1 licensure status the home will receive a monetary fine.

### Approval of Programs Reports

**Motion:** Mr. Nicholas Taylor, Catholic War Veterans made a motion to approve the programs reports as presented in the read ahead.

**Second:** Mr. Robert Cudworth, Military Officers Association of America seconded the motion.

The body agreed. The motion carried.

#### DMVA Services & Programs

Mr. Brian Natali

Mr. Natali provided a breakdown of household income handout in the packets. Mr. Natali provided a breakout of the PA Veterans' Memorial Trust Fund.

#### DMVA Outreach & Reintegration

Mr. Chip Gilliland

Mr. Gilliland provided the Commission ACT 66 summary, outreach engagements and Veterans' Trust Fund details. The Veterans' Association of Real Estate Professionals (VAREP) is looking to house a Veteran, mortgage free, in Monroe County. Information has been shared with Legislators, Eastern CoC, CDVA and others, please help and spread the word to get nominations.

**Questions/Comments:** Mr. Fidler asked if the home was wheelchair accessible. Unsure at this time, can find out. Mr. Hudzinski asked why the discrepancy on the ACT 66 chart? FY 15/16 is combined data ODAGVA and ACT 66, FY 16/17 is ACT 66 only. Mr. Hudzinski asked why the dollar amount is lower in FY16/17 when claims submitted in both years is nearly the same? Mr. Gilliland responded he would need to review further in

order to determine a cause. A comment was made regarding the ACT 66 numbers that organization are not getting credit through the RO's. Mr. Gilliland responded they will re-engage the RO's.	
<b>PA War Veterans Council</b>	<b>Mr. Bruce Foster</b>
Mr. Foster thanked General Weller for providing an overview of the budget issues at the PAWVC meeting on 6 April. Their committee has determined they will take a neutral stance on SB 25, which relates to Nurse Practitioners.	
<b>SVC Act 66 Committee</b>	<b>Mr. Samuel Petrovich</b>
There is concern with the budget that money to pay ACT 66 will come out of other Veterans money. In a meeting with Governor Wolf and Brig Gen Carrelli, they were assured the money was not being taken from other Veterans money.	
<b>SVC RETX Committee</b>	<b>Mr. Brian Natali</b>
Mr. Natali briefed on a meeting with Senator Vulakovich regarding the work the Real Estate Tax Exemption committee completed. A summary was provided, organized by the level of legislation needed. SB 389 and SB 390 affect KIA and wartime service, HB 980 affect disability compensation.	
<b>Questions/Comments:</b> Mr. Hudzinski asked if Social Security Disability income counted as income? Yes. Mr. Hudzinski doesn't remember it coming out of committee a decision on the disability compensation, that we wouldn't count that, where does that come from? There was a bill that passed late last session that does that for the L&I property tax and rent rebate program, it is specific to the L&I program. Mr. Natali continued we had plenty of discussion in the committee and on the floor, in keeping the Commission informed we made sure you are aware of the effect of household income. The information paper clearly states what the committee desired and voted on. Mr. Hudzinski responded, it is not an SVC recommendation, to be clear, we haven't made a decision on that. Mr. Fidler asked if that counted toward aid and attendance for calculation of income? Yes. Mr. Burris said when the program counted joint income, if the expenses drew the income down below the level it was approved, will the program go back to that if household income is counted? That would have to be determined when the new regulations are being written.	
<b>DAG-VA Remarks</b>	<b>Major General (Ret) Eric Weller</b>
We have compiled a task list from the last meeting and we've committed to providing a bullet paper on county homes. A business case analysis on county homes partnership is in process with the DMVA working group and we can provide detail at the next meeting. Regarding the Sportsman Show we are still identifying a point of contact and will continue to follow through. We are still in process in developing a communications plan, to include advertising dollars. The RETX bullet paper is complete and will be forthcoming. The survey on women Veterans' license plate is complete.	
<b>Old Business</b>	
Vice-Chairman Watson stated TAG has asked for a poll to be taken and asked that it be entered into the minutes as an official action so it can be referenced back to. Chairman Brenner replied the appointments for new commission members came through and there were some questions on the process, which had to do with one organization receiving more votes than any of the other sitting members. We had discussion with TAG and he had asked me to touch base with our members and ask how you felt about having three members from one organization have three votes and the rest of us have only one. We took a vote and it went 15 to 3 that we were in favor of TAG visiting the Governor and discussing our displeasure with the way it was completed. We did have a meeting with the Governor and TAG. The Governor stated he was keeping the appointments the way he originally decided. As a result, we will put a committee together to include Commission members, staff and legal to discuss and determine a process we all agree on. Mr. Cyprian stated he has been a member of this Commission in the past and there was a problem when the legion had dual votes through member at large. "I'm not here representing the County Directors Association, I'm here as a member at large. By the same thought process, I'm a life member of the VFW, so you're telling me the VFW has two votes. I'm a life member of the DAV, the DAV has two votes then. I'm a twenty-five year member of the American Legion, so you're telling me the legion has another vote. Understand, I'm here as a member at large, not a representative of the County Directors." Mr. Burris stated for the record "I belong to the same organizations. I'm a life member of just about every organization represented. I'm here as a member at large. I have been serving Veterans for the past fifteen	

years. I spent twenty-two years in the military. My job is to represent the 900,000 Veterans in the Commonwealth, their surviving spouses and their dependent children. I am not here as a County Director. I am here as a Veterans advocate. Just because a county director may vote one way does not mean that I am going to vote that same way. I'm going to vote the way I think is proper and a vote for the Veterans of this Commonwealth."

Ms. Snavelly reiterated the same. "I'm a member of MOAA, life member of VFW, DAV, Keystone PVA, Marine Corps League pulled me in too. It's 2016 and I'm the only female Veteran here at this table, so I'm also looking at representing women Veterans because the voice doesn't seem to be here. I retired after almost twenty-three years in the Army. It was news to me that there was any issue. But I don't see that any one of us is here representing one organization when we belong to so many. So that shouldn't even be an issue, in my thoughts."

Mr. Desrosiers stated if you look back at SB 847, back in 2015, that is a bill that was put out to allow the adjutants of the big four to be voting members, when they're non-voting members at this time. 2016, when the bill came through for the Korean War Veterans to be on the council, there was an amendment attached to that to again allow the adjutants to vote. That is twice that has been done; now with the Governor's appointments we have three allegedly representing the County Directors Association. Totally wrong.

Mr. Appleby stated a member at large represents the general membership of the organization. Our members at large, are not wearing service caps, they represent the 900,000 Veterans out there.

Mr. Appleby informed the Commission when Act 66 monies came to us it was in the amount of 1.6M from the Rendell Administration. They thought it was a gift, but then Director of the State Veterans Homes informed Mr. Appleby that his line item that year was reduced by 1.6M.

Mr. Olshefskie believes this is more of an ethical issue, when you are voting on your own monies.

Mr. Pliska provided new members at large AMVETS brochures and asked them to consider joining AMVETS.

#### **NEW BUSINESS**

##### **DMVA VTF Grant Process**

**Mr. Chip Gilliland and Ms. Shannan Zerance**

Mr. Gilliland and Ms. Zerance briefed the Commission on the Veterans Trust Fund grant timeline. Copies of the timeline were provided in the slide packet.

General Weller thanked Mr. Gilliland and Ms. Zerance for their presentation and informed the Commission prior to the next meeting we will do another call out for any items you want to discuss, see on the agenda or need further clarification.

Mr. Powell informed the Commission when he came on board to the Commission a few years ago he had no idea what was going on for the first six to eight months. That got him noticing there are no bylaws or administrative procedures, nothing for anyone first joining this organization to have any clue what's going on. He would like to see the Commission come up with bylaws or administrative procedures. Mr. Powell asked Chief Counsel Michael Barrett if a motion would need to be made or is this appointed by the Chairman? Mr. Barrett responded in the absence of formal procedure you can go either way.

Mr. James Powell, Marine Corps League made a motion that we form a committee to come up with bylaws, administrative procedures and anything we need.

Mr. Jerome Frank, Jewish War Veterans seconded.

Chairman Brenner called for discussion or questions on the motion. Mr. Taylor stated previously the Veterans' Commission had a session for new members that explained the process. Re-energizing that session may solve the issue at hand.

Chairman Brenner called for a vote. The majority disagreed. The motion failed.

Chairman Brenner stated they did have a session in the past and they should continue due to the high turn-over. It is important that we standardize something and go over with new members what we know and have learned over the years, to include committee responsibilities.

Maj Gen Weller said he is in favor of operating procedures, it reduces confusion.

Chairman Brenner said as a State Veterans' Commission we do make suggestions and we do work with the DMVA. They are supposed to provide what we need to get it done. We have to work together as a team in order for this Commission to function. It's understood by our legislators that we can't go out and do everything that can be done in an office, we don't have an office. The office is with the DMVA.

BG David Wood informed the Commission in February Dusty and he testified at a joint session at the House on the Real ID Act. This is important as it will impact Veterans and the citizens of the Commonwealth. The Real ID Act was put in place in 2008 as a way to try and standardize the security of ID cards. PA is one of several states not in compliance with the federal statutes. Since 2008, PA has requested extensions and they have been granted. An extension will not be granted again and as of June 5<sup>th</sup> PA driver's licenses will not be considered federally to be compliant. The TSA has extended that out to January 18, 2018 for boarding an airplane.

Anyone attempting to enter a federal installation, such as Carlisle, as of June 5<sup>th</sup> will not be able without federally compliant identification. Currently the way around for Pennsylvanian's is to get a passport.

Mr. Cyprian added the ID must also have an expiration date.

Mr. Olshefskie asked what is wrong with the driver's licenses. Mr. Durand replied when the federal government started imposing this mandate for federal verification it tied back to an originated document the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania passed, so that we would not do that, due to cost. Currently there is a Senate Bill in the House that repeals the bill that prevented us from moving forward. That will allow PennDOT to start working on the process to become compliant. It is a federal mandate to ensure it goes back to an original document to verify your identity.

Mr. Iacavazzi said the VA federal ID card is a good identification card. There was discussion regarding no expiration date on the card.

Mr. Simpson said his Department of Veterans' Affairs ID card there is an expiration date. It was mentioned it is the new ID card.

BG Wood answered what is wrong with our ID cards. It has to do with common machine readable technology. Our ID doesn't have a standard where it can be read by the technology.

**Good of the Order/Announcements**

Mr. Durand said the Veterans' Affairs and Emergency Preparedness committees have drafted a letter that they are going to send out to all the sports teams across the Commonwealth requesting participation in the 50/50, where they do at least one per year. Proceeds benefit the Veterans' Trust Fund. Once we get that letter we'll provide you a copy for your records.

Mr. Durand stated the General Assembly is creating a grass roots Veterans group. Dusty attended the second meeting. They have a lot of interest in what the Commission is doing as well as the Department. I discussed the Veterans' Registry and how important it is for us to help identify Veterans throughout the Commonwealth. We have sent them information about the Registry to include in their outreach. In addition, Representative Solomon just introduced a bill that would make it the responsibility of every department to ask that question and offer our Veterans the opportunity to register.

Mr. Brown said Delaware County is running a "Plant a Poppy Seed" initiative for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of WWI. They are giving away packets of poppy seeds and planting all over Delaware County for the fall. We should remember the sacrifices WWI Veterans made.

Chairman Brenner informed the members May 1<sup>st</sup> is loyalty day and that will be celebrated at the Capitol at 10AM.

Mr. Foster asked that VISN 4 provide an update on the Veterans identification card in relation to the mandate.

**Next Meeting**

Friday, June 2, 2017  
Arrowheads Community Club  
Fort Indiantown Gap  
Annville, PA 17003

**Adjournment**

Chairman Brenner adjourned the meeting at 11:56AM.

The minutes of this meeting are respectfully submitted by:

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