

State Veterans Commission

Meeting Minutes

February 2, 2018
10:00 AM to 11:56 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 10:00 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. John Getz	Adjutant, 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. William Wright	Commander, Catholic War Veterans
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 Snavely	Member at Large
Mr. John Cyprian	Member at Large
Mr. John Brenner	Member at Large

Others Present

Dr. Michael Adelman	VISN 4
Paul DeVincenzo	American Legion
Belinda Albright	Northumberland County Veterans Affairs
Colleen Washinger	Dauphin County Veterans Affairs
Tony Difrancesco	Dauphin County Veterans Affairs
Mr. Robert Cudworth	Military Officers Association of America
Keith Beebe	Military Officers Association of America
Robert Ziltz	Marine Corps League

Randy Wright	USDOL/VETS
Susan Meighen	Washington County Veterans Affairs
MG (Ret) Robert French	Civilian Assistant to the Secretary of the Army
Richard Fine	Jewish War Vets
William Bechdel	Clinton County Veterans Affairs
Rich Hudzinski	Vietnam Veterans of America
Nicholas Taylor	Catholic War Veterans
Jeffrey White	Vietnam Veterans of America
Matt Zamosky	PACDVA
Gerald Nikolaus	Catholic War Veterans
Nancy Burris	
Jodi Zucco	Office of Attorney General
Eugene Bell	Naval Enlisted Reserve Association
David Wood	Director of Joint Staff - PANG
Joan Nissley	DMVA-Public Affairs
Len Cowitch	DMVA-CCO
Dr. Darryl Jackson	DMVA-BVH
Rick Hamp	DMVA-OVA
Andrew Ruscavage	DMVA-BVH
Joel Mutschler	DMVA-PPL
Brian Natali	DMVA-OVA
Chip Gilliland	DMVA-OVA
Bill Weist	DMVA-OVA

Oath of Office

Major General Anthony Carrelli

General Carrelli administered the Oath of Office to the following newly appointed Pennsylvania State Veterans' Commission member:

- Mr. Harold Cooney, MOAA

Approval of the December 1, 2017 Meeting Minutes

Motion: Mr. John Pliska made a motion to approve the minutes as distributed.

Second: Mr. John Cyprian seconded the motion.

Question/Comments: Mr. Neil Appleby stated that a correction needed to be made, reflecting Mr. Benham as the Designee for the Adjutant, and Mr. Foster as the Designee for the Commander, of The American Legion. Also, it was Mr. Dominic DiFrancesco who was presented with an award in December.

The body agreed, motion carried.

Military Update

Major General Anthony Carrelli

-General Carrelli began his brief with an update on deployed troops. Currently, there are Air and Army members, as well as contractors deployed, including the Apache Company in Afghanistan.

-General Carrelli also thanked members who participated in the departure ceremony for troops who recently departed for Texas and will soon be sent overseas for a nearly year-long deployment.

-General Carrelli praised local troops for operating under extremely short notice, with the effort to assist the Erie area when they were buried under almost six feet of snow. The troops were instrumental in assisting law enforcement and medical personnel through those challenges. In addition, right around Thanksgiving, a Blackhawk from Johnstown was sent on a rescue mission, to extract a hunter who fell out of a hunting stand and shattered his leg. Local authorities were unable to get to the injured hunter, so the National Guard members were called upon to perform the rescue. The hunter was transported a short distance to a small clearing and was then evacuated by a medical helicopter to the hospital.

-General Carrelli spoke about the recent government shutdown, which lasted a few days. These events are very disruptive, especially to the military operations, so he hopes that it doesn't occur again, but it remains a possibility until a budget deal is finalized.

-General Carrelli thanked the members who were present for the VAEP hearings at the Capitol in January. The feedback from individuals outside the department was very positive, and a strong message about how important outreach is to Veterans was well received. The department will continue to work with the appropriate legislators to ensure that the dialogue is consistent and Veterans issues remain an important part of the conversation.

-General Weller briefed on the Cost Study that was done by the department. Upon initial comparison, the State Veterans Homes are more expensive than private facilities, mostly in the areas of salaries and benefits.

However, not all aspects of operational costs were listed for the private facilities when comparing to the State Veterans Homes. When all the details of operational costs were accounted for, the State Veterans Homes cost less than private care facilities.

-General Weller was also asked to look at a projected total privatization of the Homes facilities, and he found that the State Veterans Homes would still work out to be less than the current private facilities.

Motion: Mr. Chuck Jackson made a motion that the SVC request Sen. Vulakovich to have the State's Legislative, Budget and Finance Committee (LBFC) conduct a study on how best to manage the 800,000+ Veterans continuum of care from aging in place through skilled nursing care in appropriate facilities. The goal would be to have the LBFC conclude the study, so the Office of Veterans Affairs will have a blueprint in how to manage aging Veterans' health needs going forward.

Second: Mr. Tom Haberkorn seconded the motion.

The body agreed, motion carried.

VISN 4

Dr. Michael Adelman

Leadership: Patricia O'Kane is the acting Director of Butler until the position can be filled. Chuck Thilges now serves as Deputy Network Director, Jo Petro is now the Executive Assistant to the Network Director and Adam Bluff will join as a connected care Program Manager later in February.

Access: Data was provided and is positive overall. The commitment remains to assist any Veteran with an urgent issue the same day.

Trust: The trust metrics have slightly improved, but the results from these metrics are hard to move one way or another. The small amount of motion in the right direction, is a good sign.

-Dr. Adelman explained that in December, Congress appropriated an additional \$2.1 billion to cover projected shortfalls in the Veterans Choice Act Funding. This funding will only last until the end of May, so Dr. Adelman stresses there is still a dire need for Congress to act.

-Dr. Adelman stated that as of last month, the VA had a series of immediate and long-term actions in place to help improve the timeliness of the payments to the community providers.

-Dr. Adelman spoke about procedural changes that occurred last month. President Trump announced the Executive Order that provides seamless access to mental health treatments and suicide prevention resources for transitioning uniformed servicemembers in the first year following military service. Dr. Adelman states that combat Veterans have access to VA services for five years. He is told that 50-60% of Veterans needing service are not combat Veterans. Dr. Adelman goes on to say that the facilities are currently developing transition management groups, to include a Veterans family and peers, as another means of support.

-Dr. Adelman stated that there has been a significant uptick in young male Veteran suicides within that first year following military service, even as early as seven days in some cases. Nationally, the VA and the DOD are working together to streamline the processes of separation so that when Veterans are discharged in various locations, they will have access to mental health information upon discharge.

-Dr. Adelman spoke about a court decision regarding certain health care costs like some hospital charges or emergency transportation. The VA will begin processing claims for reimbursement of reasonable costs that were only partially paid by the Veterans other health insurance.

-Dr. Adelman stated that there has been a significant improvement in the function of the Veterans Crisis Line, and directed everyone to the number of emergency dispatches, explaining that those totals are a good indication that the program is doing positive work and reaching many people.

Questions/Comments: Mr. Chris Fidler asked about the status of attaining a neurologist for the Lebanon VA.

-Dr. Adelman stated that Lebanon hired one neurologist, and he believes an offer was made to one more.

-Mr. John Brenner asked if Dr. Adelman was aware of the Concerned Veterans for America (CV4A) organization, as they did not speak well of the VA at the War Council meeting.

-Dr. Adelman stated he was aware of the group, which favors privatization. He went on to say that most metrics for quality of care shows the VA exceeds the private sector or is equivalent.

-Mr. Matt Zamosky asked about the Millennium Act regarding partial payments.

-Dr. Adelman explained that if a Veteran needed emergency treatment for an issue that was not service connected, and the individual had health insurance, the VA will now look at the part of the Veteran's bill that was not covered by his/her insurance and consider a portion of that for reimbursement.

-Mr. John Getz asked if there would be any movement for combat Veterans to receive more than five years of treatment.

-Dr. Adelman explained that he didn't think the five-year limit would change, but servicemen are encouraged to establish a relationship with the VA right away. By doing this, the five-year limit won't apply to issues that are service-connected.

OLD BUSINESS

DMVA Policy, Planning & Legislative Affairs

Mr. Joel Mutschler

-Mr. Mutschler stated that legislative updates are being given to the SVC Legislative Committee Chair. The General Assembly will be in session from February 5-7th. Both DMVA budget hearings will occur on February 28th. The Senate Hearing will take place in Hearing Room 1 of the North Office Building and the House Hearing will take place in Room 140 of the Main Capitol.

DMVA Bureau of State Veterans Homes

Mr. Andrew Ruscavage

-Mr. Ruscavage stated that the annual inspection of GMVC with the Department of Health was complete, and the inspection of DVVH is currently under way. New CMS regulations are being used, so the inspections are taking slightly longer than before.

-Mr. Ruscavage also said that the last unit at GMVC was renovated and passed the life safety inspection. An issue came up with the handrails in two bathrooms, but they were quickly replaced to satisfy the inspection.

Approval of Programs Reports

Motion: Mr. Henry Desrosiers made a motion to approve the programs reports as presented in the read ahead.

Second: Mr. Ed Hanke 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 By-Law Committee

Mr. Sam Petrovich

-Mr. Petrovich briefed that his committee met in the morning to discuss homework assignments that the members need to carry out. He stated that goals have been outlined and the direction of the committee is clear. Another meeting is scheduled for mid-March and the hope is to finalize their work no later than the June SVC meeting.

SVC Act 66 Committee

Mr. Ed Hanke

-Mr. Hanke briefed that his committee met in the morning and the members are on the same page. The committee agrees that the service offices should be utilizing the VetsaSpec program for accounting purposes.

-Mr. John Brenner offered information on an Act 66 PowerPoint that was developed in the past, which will benefit this group going forward.

SVC RETX Committee

Mr. Henry Desrosiers

-Mr. Henry Desrosiers briefed that the committee met last week. Good discussion took place regarding “need” and what is “fair and equitable.” The group discussed and analyzed various aspects of the program. The goal should be to work for the Veterans and get them this benefit, but there is much left to research, to chart a path forward. House Bill 980 poses a challenge, so that will need to be discussed as the committee progresses in future meetings.

SVC Legislative Committee

Mr. Paul Kennedy

-Mr. Paul Kennedy stated no meetings have occurred. However, Mr. Kennedy contacted the five organizations he is involved with, to ask for a list of legislative issues they are currently pushing as a VSO. Mr. Kennedy states that many issues the committee is discussing are also issues that the War Council has been discussing. He is also worried that without a State resolution on these issues, many of them will fall by the wayside. Many issues have been pending for quite some time and a recommendation to have a Chair with more than one year of experience would be beneficial.

-Chairman Burris clarified his committee choices. He explained that many people on the committees have served for only one year and his choices for the committees have also included his thoughts on the sitting Adjutants.

SVC Pensions & Relief/Grave Marking/State Military Cemetery Committee

Mr. John Brenner

-Mr. John Brenner stated that he has not set up any committee meetings but is now attempting to do so.

NEW BUSINESS

-Mr. Tom Haberkorn deferred to Mr. Rich Hudzinski to help explain the Vietnam Veterans position on the RETX program. The concern is that counties in the Commonwealth may not all be complying in the same manner. To ensure that the program is being assessed the same way across the entire state, a survey is being requested. At that point, the SVC can consider legislative or regulatory changes going forward.

Motion: Mr. Tom Haberkorn made the above motion to call upon the DMVA, or the General Assembly if the DMVA lacks the means, to survey the various taxing authorities in each county of the Commonwealth to ensure compliance with the current RETX law.

Second: Mr. Chuck Jackson seconded the motion.

-Mr. John Cyprian asked if it would be easier to send out a policy instead of surveying all taxing authorities in each county.

-General Carrelli asked for clarification on the program. He asked if the law is allowing room for interpretation or if it is an unwillingness to follow the law as written. He also mentioned that going to the legislature to change the law will be completely different than asking for an audit of existing procedures. If specific examples of counties not complying are supplied, then that can be brought before the County Commissioners or the Auditor General for them to investigate.

-Mr. Hudzinski went on to say that an audit or survey is needed to obtain those facts before determining the next step.

-Mr. Len Cowitch explained that after the department determines need, the responsibility falls to the counties to follow through. Assessing the program will require a global look at the situation, beyond what the DMVA can accomplish. An internal discussion will be required to determine how the info can be gathered and then how to proceed.

-Mr. Henry Desrosiers stated that a motion was passed last year, asking for a regulation to be changed, stating that Mandate 8903 be amended to require county boards of assessment to recognize the date stamp on the claim as the date the exemption begins.

-Mr. John Cyprian asked what the repercussion may be if a taxing authority doesn't participate in the survey and if the body of the SVC has the authority to request the survey at all.

By majority, the body agreed, motion carried.

-Chairman Burris asked for the head of VVA to put together a letter which will be sent to CCAP to start this process of information gathering.

-Mr. Hudzinski asked if the DMVA could do this action instead.

-Chairman Burris explained that if the counties are not operating in the same manner, communication from the SVC member making the motion would be the appropriate place to start, to ensure all counties are checking their process.

-Mr. Tom Haberkorn asked for a pre-budget meeting from the DMVA to the SVC and deferred to Mr. Hudzinski to explain.

-Mr. Hudzinski asked if General Carrelli would consider having pre-budget hearings starting next fiscal year on what the DMVA is proposing regarding Veterans and programs. He reminded everyone that one purpose of the Commission is to advise The Adjutant General on all manner of Veterans issues, and budgets have a lot to do with the servicing of Veterans. He went on to say that if the SVC knew more details, they may be able to advise The Adjutant General better.

-General Carrelli stated he has no problem answering direct questions and going over the budget information either with a service organization who wants a private meeting or stating the details as part of an SVC meeting.

-Mr. John Brenner said he appreciated when General Carrelli went over the budget info with his service organization.

-General Weller asked for clarification if DMVA was being asked to share what the department is proposing to the Governor's Budget Office prior to the start of the next fiscal year.

-Mr. Hudzinski confirmed that his organization is asking for information at the "thinking stage."

-General Carrelli explained that once the department engages with the Governor's office, they cannot release any information until after the Governor's budget announcement has been made. Before or after that timeframe would be no problem to discuss any details.

-Mr. Hudzinski explained that the intention is to act as a unified body and advise as a commission.

-General Weller asked for another point of clarification. He confirmed that the SVC would be willing to look at the existing budget, after the announcement occurs and then work on suggestions for next fiscal year, based on what the current numbers are.

Recognition/Awards	Major General Carrelli
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-Mr. Kit Watson was awarded a Certificate of Appreciation for his previous service as Vice Chairman of the SVC.

S.A.V.E. Training	Mr. Piro Rjepaj/Ms. Lori Warne
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-Ms. Warne from the Lebanon VA discussed the purpose of the talk being mental health care and suicide prevention. She went into statistics, myths and realities and discussed the S.A.V.E. acronym standing for: Signs of suicidal thinking, Asking the important questions, Validate the Veterans experience, and Encourage treatment and Expedite getting help. Ms. Warne explained warning signs and ended by sharing plenty of resource materials with the SVC.

-Dr. Adelman concluded by sharing some statistics on suicide rates across the country and encouraging everyone to use the information presented to possibly save a life.

-Ms. Warne added that over the summer the VA had the #BeThere campaign. Looking up that information will show that no one needs an advanced degree to help someone who is struggling. Being present and asking a few questions can go a long way to assisting someone.

-Mr. Rjepaj commented that the VA has many resources and opportunities to share knowledge about mental health challenges and outreach events for individuals to attain greater understanding of how to assist and how to pass on the valuable information.

-General Carrelli mentioned that Pennsylvania is above the national average for suicides, coming to almost one a day. Immediate action is needed to continue looking out for servicemen and women who are still in uniform or no longer wear one.

-Mr. Jeff White stated that many of the daily suicide victims are over 50 years of age, most of whom are not enrolled in the VA. Also, most individuals will not take action to assist until the issue hits home. Talking to a

local Senator or Representative can be beneficial in setting up an information table at a Senior Fair in local community areas. Talking about the issue often and having the information and phone numbers easily accessible can save a life when it is least expected.

Good of the Order/Announcements

-General Weller restated a few tasks that were mentioned and verified who was to accomplish each one. 1.) About the study in relation to healthcare, the SVC will get in touch with the VAE members, and work in conjunction with the DMVA as they do any necessary legislative work on their part. 2.) Mr. Hudzinski will provide a copy of the Act 66 PowerPoint to the committee members for their use. 3.) Mr. Bender will provide the needed RETX data to the committee members. 4.) The VVA will draft the letter for the County Commissioners.

-Mr. Jeff White informed the group of a discrepancy with the number of KIA's in Delaware County. When this information was brought to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, the response was that the number listed came from the DOD and no more names would be added. Everyone is encouraged to check to see if the names listed in other counties are correct.

Service Update – The American Legion Mr. Paul Kennedy

-Mr. Paul Kennedy informed the group that on April 10th, The American Legion will be holding their oratorical contest at the Capitol Forum at 10:00am. This contest is for High School students and the winner will be granted a check for \$16,000.

Service Update – Military Order of the Purple Heart Mr. Chuck Jackson

-No update currently prepared

Service Update – Catholic War Vets Mr. William Wright

-No update currently prepared

Service Update – Blinded Veterans Association Mr. Neil Appleby

-No update currently prepared

*The same four service organizations will be on the next agenda, to allow all members to prepare for a brief update.

Discussion Topic for Next Meeting

-Chairman Burris asked Mr. Harold Cooney to have discussion information prepared and ready for his alternate at the next meeting.

Next Meeting

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

Adjournment

Chairman Burris adjourned the meeting at 11:56 AM.

The minutes of this meeting are respectfully submitted by:

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