



## VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMISSION

Meeting Minutes

March 1, 2011

### I. Call to Order – Charles Huggins, Vice Chairman

The regular meeting of the Veterans Affairs Commission was called to order by Charles Huggins, Vice Chairman, at 10:00 a.m. on Tuesday, March 1, 2011. The meeting was held at the Galvez State Office Building, 602 N. Fifth Street, Baton Rouge. Mr. Henry led the pledge of allegiance, followed by prayer by Mrs. Wilkewitz. Roll call was conducted by Ms. Scott. Excused absences noted were Mr. Don Beasley, Chairman (out of town) and Mr. Lee Richard (sick). A quorum was present.

#### **Present:**

**COMMISSIONERS:** Charles Huggins, Russell Henry, Carroll Knott, John Abshire, Sulanda Lonnette, Richard Garner, and Precilla Wilkewitz.

**LDVA STAFF:** Lane Carson, Secretary; Thomas Burbank, Undersecretary; David LaCerte, Deputy Secretary; Robert Hayes, Deputy Undersecretary; Kevin Butler, Deputy Assistant Secretary/Homes; Richard Blackwell, Deputy Assistant Secretary/Benefits; Debbie Smith, Human Resources Director; Don Howard, Troops to Teachers Director; Bill Dixon, State Approving Agency (SAA) Director; Amy Burris, Confidential Assistant; Linda Theriot, Director of Nursing Services; and Charmagne Scott, Administrative Assistant.

### II. Approval of Minutes

The minutes of the November 17, 2010, meeting had previously been distributed to the Commissioners for review. It was motioned by Mr. Henry, seconded by Mr. Garner, to approve the minutes as distributed. The motion passed unanimously, with Mr. Richard absent for the vote.

### III. Division Reports

Management/Finance. Ms. Smith reviewed the personnel status report as of February 18, 2011, which had been forwarded to the Members for review prior to the meeting. She noted the following changes in vacancies since the report was mailed: the Administrative Aide position (Office of the Secretary) has been filled; three current vacancies at the NW Veterans Cemetery: Administrative Program Manager and two Horticultural Attendant

positions. There is no longer a Custodian position, as custodial services are now being outsourced via state contract. It was motioned by Mrs. Wilkewitz, seconded by Mr. Abshire, to approve the personnel status report as amended. The motioned unanimously passed, with Mr. Richard absent for the vote.

Mr. Hayes reviewed the FY 2010/2011 operating budget as of January 25, 2011, provided to the Members for review prior to the meeting. He noted that 59% of the budget (\$29,129,188) had been expended to date, all programs were operating on track, and there were no current budgetary concerns. It was motioned by Mr. Knott, seconded by Mr. Henry, to approve the budget report as presented. The motion passed unanimously, with Mr. Richard absent for the vote.

State Veterans Homes. Mr. Butler reviewed the War Veterans Homes System first quarter report for 2011 via handout and briefed on new developments since the last report.

- All five homes are 91.0% occupied collectively, which is a decrease in census over the last quarter due to deaths.
- Another Pharmacy Technician has been added to the In-House Pharmacy at the Reserve facility to increase timely delivery of medicines to the veterans.
- The new federal reimbursement rates have allowed all homes to increase their expenditures and capture additional federal dollars that can be used for operational purposes.
- Another full power generator will be installed at the Bossier City home before the end of 2011, which will serve as a primary evacuation site for the Jennings home. The generator will be funded by remaining generator grant funds.
- The staff apartments on the grounds of the Jackson home have been vacated and are now available for veterans requiring assistance other than long-term care. The greenhouse and wood working shop are also being reopened for the veterans' use.
- The interior renovation project at the Monroe home is now complete. The home also admitted its first veteran's spouse since legislation was changed to allow this type of admission. The monthly cost of care is \$4,500; however, if the spouse becomes Medicare-eligible, there will be no out-of-pocket expenses.
- The Jennings home continues to maintain the highest Medicare utilization of the other homes.
- The increase in Nurse's Aide wages has reduced the turnover rate at the Bossier City home, which was the highest of all the homes.
- The Reserve home continues to have the highest demand for admissions of all the homes. The bathroom renovation project has progressed slower than anticipated; as of date, only one shower room has been replaced due to faulty installation. This project is being supervised by the Office of Facility Planning and Control, and the remainder of the bathrooms should be repaired within the next six months.

CENSUS STATS PER HOME

<b>Facility</b>	<b>Bed Capacity</b>	<b>Current Census</b>	<b>Available Beds</b>
LWVH/Jackson	161	138	23
NELWVH/Monroe	156	139	17
SWLWVH/Jennings	156	147	10
NWLWVH/Bossier City	156	147	9
SELWVH/Reserve	156	146	10

It was motioned by Mr. Knott, seconded by Mr. Henry, to approve the State Veterans Homes' report as presented. The motion passed unanimously, with Mr. Richard absent for the vote.

State Cemeteries. Via handout, Mr. Burbank commented that the Northwest Veterans Cemetery continues to operate efficiently and Mike Richardson is doing a fine job as Acting Administrator. The position of Administrator 4, which will oversee both the Northwest and Central Louisiana Veterans Cemeteries, has been advertised. To date, 30 applications have been submitted. The elimination of the Custodian position (mentioned during the Personnel Report) and utilization of custodial services via state contract will result in a savings of \$23,000 annually. The Operations/Maintenance Grant, totaling \$750,000, for site improvements at the Northwest Louisiana cemetery will be resubmitted to VA by April 15.

Regarding the Central Louisiana cemetery project, construction is progressing on schedule; the anticipated completion time is near the end of November.

State Capital Outlay funding (seed money) for the third state cemetery to be located in St. Tammany Parish has been submitted for consideration during the upcoming legislative session. In ranking the remainder of the statewide cemetery projects (Northeast/Rayville, Southeast/St. Tammany, and Southwest/Jennings), the St. Tammany Parish location was selected based on an analysis by the VA which showed it had the largest under-served population.

It was motioned by Mr. Abshire, seconded by Mr. Henry, to approve the State Cemeteries report as presented. The motion passed unanimously, with Mr. Richard absent for the vote.

Troops to Teachers. Mr. Howard provided the Members with an information packet that highlighted the Troops to Teachers (T<sup>3</sup>) program. T<sup>3</sup> is a national program located within states, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, and administered by the Department of Defense. The program's mission is to recruit qualified teachers in an effort to relieve teacher shortage while, at the same time, assist military personnel in making successful transitions to a new career as public school teachers. Since 1996, approximately 230 teachers have been placed in classrooms in Louisiana.

In other remarks, Mr. Dixon mentioned the GI Bill Educational Enhancement Act, which expands the Chapter 33-Post 9/11 GI Bill, has been signed by the President. The new act now provides more educational opportunities for veterans than the old GI Bill (Chapter 30).

It was motioned by Mr. Henry, seconded by Ms. Lonnelle, to approve the Troops to Teachers report as presented. The motion passed unanimously, with Mr. Richard absent for the vote.

Military Family Assistance Fund (MFAF). Mr. Blackwell reviewed his standard handout showing the fund's starting balance for the 2010/2011 Fiscal Year; donations and expenditures to date; and the current balance as of March 1, 2011 (*see table below*). The report also showed the number of individuals assisted and the amount paid in need based and lump sum claims since May 1, 2008, when the MFAF was transferred to the LDVA.

<b>Starting Balance (July 1, 2010)</b>	<b>\$461,083.95</b>
Donations to date	\$31,216.08
Expenditures to date	\$96,809.18
<b>Current Fund Balance</b>	<b>\$395,490.85</b>

Mr. Blackwell also provided updates within the Benefits Division:

- A Veterans Service Office for St. Bernard Parish is now opened in Chalmette.
- The move of the Orleans Parish Veterans Service Office from Jackson Barracks (Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward) to downtown New Orleans is still pending.
- A Veterans Service Office is currently being negotiated for Plaquemines Parish (Belle Chasse).
- A new Veterans Assistance Counselor (VAC) has been hired for Bienville/Claiborne Parish. Also, Tony Coleman, former LDVA employee, has been hired as the VAC for St. Tammany Parish (Covington office).

It was motioned by Mr. Abshire, seconded by Mr. Henry, to approve the MFAF and Benefits reports as presented. The motion passed unanimously, with Mr. Richard absent for the vote.

Public Relations/Outreach. In the absence of Ms. Robin Keller, Press Secretary, Ms. Burris briefed on the latest PR/Outreach events:

- Approximately 25,000 honor medals have been awarded to date, either through a ceremony or via mail. The applications have been updated to include the option to receive the medal via mail. Telephone calls were made to applicants already in the database asking their preference in receiving the medal.
- A ribbon cutting ceremony is being planned for the new Caddo Parish Veterans Service Office. The office moved from the City Hall Annex to its new location on Creswell Avenue in Shreveport.

- LDVA plans to host several regional veterans' events that will include topics on various benefits, LAVETBIZ, MFA Fund, women veterans' issues, etc. The Women's Veterans Conference is in the early planning stages, tentatively scheduled for June 2011 in Shreveport.
- The "Support Our Veterans" license plate is now available for sale at all Offices of Motor Vehicles. Within the first week after print media ads were released, 22 plates had been purchased. The \$25 one-time application fee goes to the MFA Fund.
- This year's MFA Fund promotional campaign included flyers being sent to 888 CPAs in Louisiana, in addition to being posted at all of the parish service offices and distributed at all medals events. Also, Governor Jindal's public service announcement, originally taped in 2008, will be re-airing through April 15<sup>th</sup>.
- A tabletop display of all LDVA programs is in the development stage. The display will be at VSO conventions, job fairs, veterans' events, etc., with a debut planned for the upcoming summer VSO department conventions.
- A copy of the January 24, 2011, news release on the status of the Central Louisiana (CENLA) Veterans Cemetery (Leesville) was circulated. The project is in the construction phase and is scheduled for full completion by late winter 2011. Also, a marketing plan is currently being developed to identify ways to better promote the cemeteries to veterans and their families in Louisiana and surrounding states.
- Liberty Hill Apartments, the former staff apartments on the grounds of the Jackson Veterans Home, are tentatively scheduled for opening later this month. A grand opening/media event will be held once the date has been finalized. The apartments feature three units and are a housing option for veterans 55 years or older who are not ready for full-time nursing care, but still need some attention. Amenities include three meals served at the home, monthly housekeeping, laundry, and utilities (excluding cable).
- An updated LAVETBIZ brochure was circulated that features more contact and certification information.

In other comments, Secretary Carson introduced Walter Mlynarski as the new director of Veterans Outreach, replacing Mike McNaughton. Mr. Mlynarski is a disabled veteran, and a former businessman and federal VA employee.

It was motioned by Mr. Knott, seconded by Mr. Henry, to approve the PR/Outreach report as presented. The motion passed unanimously, with Mr. Richard absent for the vote.

#### **IV. Date of Next Meeting**

This item was tabled until Secretary Carson confers with the Chairman.

## V. Other Matters

### VSO Mid-Winter Conference Reports

- Mr. Henry reported the American Legion conference was held in January. Secretary Carson was in attendance and it was business as usual. Mr. Huggins followed with a suggestion that Parish VACs attend these conferences to brief on veterans' benefits.
- Mr. Knott reported the VFW conference was very good and well attended. Secretary Carson, Mr. Blackwell, and Mr. Butler were in attendance. Mrs. Wilkewitz also announced the National Association of State Women Veterans Coordinators National Conference will be held on May 17-23, 2011, in Wisconsin.
- Mr. Garner reported the MOPH conference was held in Pineville in January (the same weekend of the VFW conference). Secretary Carson was in attendance. The National Service Officer was also in attendance to do training and give an update from the MOPH National Office. The MOPH Department Convention will be held on June 17-18 in Baton Rouge.

In other remarks, Ms. Lonnelle stated she has distributed more applications for the Veterans Honor Medal due to her working with veterans at the Governor's Office of Homeland Security/Emergency Preparedness.

Secretary Carson distributed copies of the LDVA's office layout at the Galvez State Office Building.

## VI. Adjournment

There being no further business to be brought before the Veterans Affairs Commission, the meeting was adjourned at 11:22 a.m.

/s/ Don A. Beasley, Chairman

/s/ Lane A. Carson, Secretary

August 16, 2011  
Date of Approval

*Minutes submitted by Charmagne Scott, AA6. Copies of all handouts are filed with the Commission minutes.*