



JOHN BEL EDWARDS



JOEY STRICKLAND

## Louisiana Department of Veterans Affairs Veterans Affairs Commission

### Meeting Minutes September 25, 2019

#### **I. Call to Order – Rudy Bourg, Chairman**

The September 25, 2019 meeting of the Veterans Affairs Commission was called to order by Chairman Rudy Bourg at 10:01 am. The meeting was held at the Louisiana Department of Veterans Affairs (LDVA) Administrative Office, 602 N. Fifth Street, Baton Rouge. The meeting opened with the pledge of allegiance recited in unison, led by Richard O'Brien. Prayer led by Commissioner Paul Hermann. Roll call of members was conducted by Mr. Hermann.

Commissioners present: Chairman Rudy Bourg, Vice Chairman Richard O'Brien, Paul Hermann, Deron Santiny, Ray Bass, Ryan Beissinger, and Mike Russell.

LDVA Staff: Joey Strickland, Secretary; Julie Baxter-Payer, Chief of Staff; Dustin Guy, Deputy Chief of Staff; Lisa Bruhl, Deputy Assistant Secretary/Veterans Homes; Cleo Wallace, State Approving Agency (SAA) Director; Holly Talley, Executive Management Officer; English Josey, Internal Auditor; Billy Robbins, Cemeteries Program Director; Barry Robinson, Capital Area Regional Manager/Training Officer; Stephanie Wade, Chief Financial Officer; English Josey, Internal Audit Manager; Alex Juan, Communication Director; Jennifer Hahn, Gold Star Family Coordinator; Torrence Joseph, Education Program Coordinator/SAA .

Guests Present: Byran Comeaux and Tony Betts, both from the American Legion.

#### **II. Introductory Remarks- Secretary Joey Strickland**

Secretary Strickland welcomed Commissioners. He gave an overview of the status of the department. LDVA is in good shape with many exciting things happening: LaVet Corp, the Gold Star Family Program, Building of the Veterans Cemetery in Jennings, expansion at Slidell and the benefits division being fully staffed.

#### **III. Approval of May 22, 2019 Minutes**

The May 22, 2019 meeting minutes were distributed to the Commissioners for review. There were no objections to the minutes. A motion was made by Mr. Hermann, seconded by Mr. Bass, to approve the minutes as distributed. The motion passed unanimously.

## V. Division Reports

**State Approving Agency.** Cleo Wallace reported on SAA. The Louisiana Department of Veterans Affairs, State Approving Agency (SAA), Veterans Education and Training, has completed the first and second quarters of FY2019 VACO/SAA Cooperative Agreement. The SAA has approval, supervision and compliance survey responsibility for over 250 approved schools and training establishments for FY19 within the State of Louisiana. Completed Active Facility Count for FY2020 with a grand total of 231 active facilities. Louisiana is compliant with requirements of 38 U.S.C. 3679(c) as amended to include Chapter 31 VR&E, a covered individual must be charged the resident rate for semesters, course, or terms beginning after March 1, 2019.

A motion was made by Mr. Hermann, seconded by Mr. Santiny to accept the report as presented. The motion passed unanimously.

**Fiscal.** Stephanie Smith gave overview for Fiscal Department. LDVA had 79% of the FY 2019-20 budget remaining. The MFA Fund as of September 13, has disbursements totaling \$19,211.63. Leaving \$96,316.37 for FY 2019-20.

A motion was made by Mr. Santiny, seconded by Mr. Beissinger to accept the report as presented. The motion passed unanimously.

**Legal.** Julie Baxter Payer briefed on 2 ongoing civil service cases and 1 pending lawsuit. She then gave an overview of the reports submitted by various department staff. LDVA is growing. The department is working on updating their administrative rules. She reminded Commissioners of the requirement to complete the mandatory Sexual Harassment and Ethics trainings online in LEO.

A motion was made by Mr. Santiny, seconded by Mr. O'Brien to accept the report as presented. The motion passed unanimously.

**Human Resources (HR).** Dustin Guy gave a Human Resources overview for the department. HQ Authorized T.O. = **115** (Increase in 7 positions from **108**, effective July 2019): Admin – 15; Claims – 7; SAA – 4 (+1 position); Contact Assistance – 60 (+1 VAC position, Beauregard Parish); Cemetery Program – 29 (+5 positions, Jennings Cemetery, March 2020 Opening). In July, significantly increased starting rate for nursing staff at Jackson Veterans Home, which included a corresponding adjustment for current employees above the new starting rate. Currently reviewing possibility of implementing the same type of increase for nursing staff at remaining four Veterans Homes. Planning to be included on November Civil Service Commission meeting agenda for consideration.

A motion was made by Mr. Hermann, seconded by Mr. Beissinger to accept the report as presented. The motion passed unanimously.

**Contact Assistance.** Vanessa Melancon briefed on the benefits division. All of us were deeply saddened by the sudden loss of our Southeast Regional Manager, David Holcombe.

He worked for LDVA for over 20 years after retiring from the Navy. He dedicated his life to serving his country and his military family, and helped to better the lives of thousands of veterans along the way. We began using VetraSpec to document our activities, replacing the old manual paper process. We are now able to generate an interactive report for each region that allows Regional Managers to better analyze office activities. Beginning August 1, 2019, our Veterans Assistance Counselors (VACs) began processing applications for Louisiana Economic Development's Veterans First Business Initiative. Owners of businesses owned by veterans; current active duty, guard, and reserve members; and Gold Star spouses are eligible to have their businesses certified as veteran-, military-, or Gold Star-owned. As such, they are included on a public, searchable database and are allowed to use the Veterans First logo in their marketing materials. Our VACs play a key role in the application process by verifying that the owner is a member of one of the three categories entitled to this benefit.

A motion was made by Mr. Santiny, seconded by Mr. Hermann to accept the report as presented. The motion passed unanimously.

**State Veterans Homes (SVHs).** Lisa Bruhl briefed on her standard consolidated report. Also, copies of demographic information for all facilities were provided to the Commissioners. Ms. Bruhl highlighted activities at each facility:

**Louisiana Veterans Home (Jackson):**

- Unit/Wing 4 –remodeling all shower rooms/stalls.
- Mansard/Roof Project – FP&C –Exterior roofing – remains in the planning phase.
- New Transport Van – Process continues to order new van for resident appointments.
- Fire/Smoke Damper System repaired, updated and inspected.

**Northeast Veterans Home (Monroe):**

- Cooling Tower Project - On 6/19/2019, facility Administration met with FP&C and the project Engineer to discuss completing this project in two phases. Phase one started in July and will go about 3 ½ months with concrete pour for concrete footings and structural towers base / curing of concrete as well as erecting new cooling towers on base, and electrical work. Phase two to begin December timeframe and go about 3 months setting heat exchangers and pumps, installing piping, bypass installation, and demolishing existing towers, pumps on existing pad.
- Surveillance camera system – Project completed.

**Southwest Veterans Home (Jennings):**

- Cooling Tower Project – SWLVH transferred necessary funds for the project to FP&C on August 22, 2019 in order to proceed with “Advertisement for Bids”.
- Hallway & Office HVAC units’ replacement planning for this year’s Capital Outlay project. 53 units will be replaced at a cost of \$739,350. FP&C working to get this project on the October Engineer Selection Board.
- Ditch Culvert Project- Installation of culverts completed, waiting on DOTD to inspect for final approval.
- Parking Lot Project- Project completed.

- Nurse call system – Project completed.
- Bronze Female Solider – Dedication ceremony was held on August 21<sup>st</sup>.
- Capital Outlay Project: Walk-In-The-Park (Reflections/Alzheimer’s Wing Expansion) – All Bids received in Baton Rouge were over the allotted budget and therefor rejected by Facility Planning, so working through the process with FP&C.

**Northwest Veterans Home (Bossier City):**

- Ancillary committee donating new furniture for Wing 1 – Sofa and a few recliners.
- Coordinating with FP&C for future major repair work for FY 20.
- Surveillance camera project – Completed
- Painting on wings 2 & 3 - Completed

**Southeast Veterans Home (Reserve):**

- Capital Outlay Project - HVAC- Individual Units- completion of the installation of units.
  - Change Order- to include new wiring to replace existing for proper communication purposes. This project is near completed and training with the maintenance personnel is pending.
- FY 20, Triad (Vendor) has completed internet equipment upgrade to include additional wireless access points.
- Currently, OTS is evaluating assessment and cost analysis of phone equipment and system. (Pending)
- New Vehicles- facility will be following process to add 2- vehicles to their fleet to meet transportation needs and replacement of 1 vehicle.
- Pond Project- initiating conversation with FP&C for options to complete in current FY. If not possible, facility will be entering as a capital outlay expense for FY20/21.
- Bronze Female Solider – Dedication ceremony was held on May 24<sup>th</sup>.

A motion was made by Mr. Bass, seconded by Mr. Hermann to accept the report as presented. The motion passed unanimously.

**State Cemeteries.** Billy Robbins briefed on the state VA cemeteries. Mr. Robbins reported the SE LA Veterans Cemetery in Slidell remains the busiest of the states 4 cemeteries. It has had a total of 770 interments for 2018. Things are well underway for the cemetery in Jennings. Projected to be completed December 2019 with plans to open in March 2020.

A motion was made by Mr. Beissinger, seconded by Mr. Hermann to accept the report as presented. The motion passed unanimously.

**LaVetCorps.** Julie Baxter Payer briefed on LaVetCorps in the absence of Dr. Nikki Bray Clark. LaVetCorps successfully opened 26 veteran centers on college campuses across the state. Campus reception of the LaVetCorps navigators has been positive and they are reporting back favorably on first experiences. LDVA is currently in the final stages of hiring 3 more navigators to fill vacant centers and we are actively recruiting for the last at Nunez Community College in Chalmette.

A motion was made by Mr. Santiny, seconded by Mr. O'Brien to accept the report as presented. The motion passed unanimously.

## **VI. Adjournment**

There being no further business to be brought before the Veterans Affairs Commission, a motion was made by Mr. Hermann, seconded by Mr. Bass, to adjourn the meeting. The motion passed and the meeting adjourned at 12:08 pm.

---

*Chairman Rudolph A. Bourg, Sr.*

---

*Secretary Joey Strickland*

---

*Date of Approval*

*Minutes submitted by Holly Talley. Copies of all handouts are filed with the Commission minutes and are available upon request.*