



VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMISSION

Meeting Minutes
June 30, 2010

I. Call to Order – Don Beasley, Chairman

A special meeting of the Veterans Affairs Commission was called to order by Don Beasley, Chairman, at 10:00 a.m. on Wednesday, June 30, 2010, at the Department of Veterans Affairs Administrative Office, 1885 Wooddale Boulevard, 10th Floor, Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Commissioner Richard led in the pledge of allegiance, followed by prayer from Ms. Wilkewitz. Mr. Beasley then conducted the roll call of Members and noted the absences of Commissioners Garner and Henry as excused. He also introduced the new LDVA Deputy Secretary (effective July 1, 2010), David LaCerte, to the Commissioners.

Present:

COMMISSIONERS: Don Beasley, Charles Huggins, Carroll Knott, Sulanda Lonnette, John Abshire, Precilla Wilkewitz, and Lee Richard

LDVA STAFF: Lane Carson, Thomas Burbank, Robert Hayes, Debbie Smith, Linda Theriot, Kevin Butler, Richard Blackwell, Amy Burris, Robin Keller, Mike McNaughton, and Charmagne Scott

II. 2010 Legislative Overview

Mr. Carson briefly commented on several budget cuts during the fiscal year due to declining state revenue, but no personnel were lost and the cuts did not impact the overall mission of the department. He also noted that the state general funds received by LDVA have decreased, but federal funds have maximized significantly, especially at the Veterans Homes.

Mr. Carson then provided a summary report of the bills passed during the 2010 Legislative Session sponsored by LDVA:

- Act 104 (House Bill No. 1204) creates a license plate in which the proceeds will be dedicated to the Military Family Assistance Fund (MFAF) for veterans programs.
- Act 256 (House Bill No. 583) amends the current law to allow the Military Family Assistance Board to expend a certain amount of funds on veteran outreach activities.

- Act 402 (House Bill No. 1206) lowers the threshold to 50 percent disabled veterans who can obtain a free, permanent driver's license, which conforms to numerous programs and benefits with thresholds at 50 percent.
- Act 234 (House Bill No. 174) recreates the LDVA for four years.

Other legislative action on bills pertaining to Louisiana veterans was: (1) a proposed amendment to Act 260 of the 2007 Legislative Session, which provides a lump-sum payment to National Guardsmen who die or become permanently and totally disabled on or after July 6, 2007. The proposal was to make the Act retroactive to 9/11 and clarify the criteria for permanent total disability. The bill never passed out of the Senate Finance Committee; and (2) House Bill No. 246 is a proposed amendment to the Constitution pertaining to homestead exemption from ad valorem tax of property owned and occupied by 100 percent service-connected disabled veterans. The bill has been filed with the Secretary of State's Office and is pending voter approval.

III. End of Fiscal Year Reports (by Division)

Management/Finance. The standard handouts showing the status of all LDVA budgetary programs as of June 28, 2010, were distributed and reviewed by Mr. Hayes, Deputy Undersecretary. The percentage of the budget expended was 95.8 percent and the remaining free budget was 4.2 percent. Mr. Hayes further reported that the LDVA has been operating under an Executive Order issued by the Governor which affected spending and travel, but there was no severe impact on overall operations. Additional handouts were provided on the department's Means of Financing for the past and current fiscal year (2008/2009 and 2009/2010) and the new fiscal year (2010/2011) beginning July 1, 2010. Mr. Hayes noted the decrease in state general funds while other funding resources (e.g., federal and self-generated funds) increased.

Ms. Smith, Human Resources Director, provided a handout of the total number of current vacancies within the LDVA (Administration) and the Veterans Homes as of June 30, 2010, and the frozen positions to be cut from the department's Table of Organization (TO) on July 1, 2010.

A motion was made by Ms. Wilkewitz, seconded by Ms. Lonnette, to accept the Management/Finance reports as presented. The motion unanimously passed.

Cemetery and Other Reports. Mr. Burbank, Undersecretary, briefed via handout on the state cemeteries and other projects. The bid process for construction of the Central Louisiana Veterans Cemetery (Leesville) will close on July 1. The next phase will be the awarding of the construction contract. The review and execution of the contract between the state and the winning bidder normally takes 60-90 days. Groundbreaking is estimated to be held early to mid-fall 2010.

A Triennial Review of the Northwest Louisiana Veterans Cemetery (Keithville) is scheduled for July 8-9, 2010. A new grant request will be submitted to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for operation/maintenance upgrades. The carillon is currently operational. The official dedication of the carillon is currently being planned in coordination with AMVETS National Office.

Total funding (up to \$750,000) for a new generator at the Louisiana War Veterans Home (Jackson) has been obtained from FEMA (via the Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness). Bids will be received until July 14, 2010.

The State plans to sell the Wooddale State Office Building. The LDVA Administrative Office and the DAV and American Legion offices will be relocated to existing space at a state office building located in downtown Baton Rouge (most likely the Claiborne Building, located behind the State Capitol). The anticipated move is scheduled to occur before the end of December 2010.

A motion was made by Mr. Abshire, seconded by Mr. Knott, to accept the reports by Undersecretary Burbank as presented. The motion unanimously passed.

State Veterans Homes Report. Mr. Butler, Deputy Assistant Secretary/Homes, distributed the 2nd quarter consolidated report. All five homes collectively are 95.2% occupied, a 2.5% increase since the last quarter's report. Spouses and parents of veterans have been admitted into the homes since the admission requirements were amended by recent legislation.

Mr. Butler then briefed on each facility's operation:

- Approval has been granted through the Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness (GOHSEP) to fund 100% the installation of a new generator at the Jackson home that would allow the facility to remain fully operational during a power outage. The Jackson home is the primary evacuation site for the Jennings and Reserve homes.
- As of date, the interior renovations project at the Monroe home is approximately 50 percent complete and total completion is expected by September 2010.
- The Jennings home continues to have strong community support and recent local events have resulted in donations of several thousand dollars to the facility.
- Since the last report on February 11, 2010, the Bossier City home was successful in raising the wages of the nursing assistants to be competitive with local nursing homes and hospitals. The wage increase allowed several former employees to return to employment at the home.

- Physical plant issues and corrective actions at the Reserve home are still being discussed with the contractors and the Office of Facility Planning and Control. The home continues to have the highest occupancy and waiting list for admission.

In other reports, Ms. Theriot, Nursing Compliance Officer, recently received training on the new Minimum Data Set (MDS) 3.0 process by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid. National implementation of this process is scheduled for October 1, 2010. Ms. Theriot has conducted onsite presentations and training to educate the appropriate staff at all homes on the new reporting requirements and changes. She also mentioned there are no problems being experienced in getting medications to the veterans on time since the implementation of the centralized pharmacy. Commissioners Beasley and Knott stated they had received complaints about the new delivery of services, but they were minimal. Ms. Wilkewitz added that any complaints received should be addressed with formal responses and there should be more effort in promoting the positive advantages of the new delivery of medical and pharmacy services.

It was motioned by Mr. Knott, seconded by Mr. Richard, to accept the State Veterans Homes reports as presented. The motion unanimously passed.

Veterans Benefits Report. Mr. Blackwell provided handouts that noted new Parish Services Offices now opened in Grant Parish, Orleans Parish, and Cameron Parish; the balance of the Military Family Assistance Fund as of June 28, 2010; and a schedule of the Veterans Assistance Counselors (VAC) Regional Training Sessions to be held at the veterans' homes since the Annual VAC Training Conference had to be cancelled due to budget constraints. Copies of the VA Fiscal Year 2009 Expenditure Report and the 2010 Military Family Assistance Board Report were also provided for the Members' review.

It was motioned by Mr. Huggins, seconded by Mr. Richard, to accept the Veterans Benefits Report as presented. The motion unanimously passed.

Outreach Report. Mr. McNaughton, Veterans Outreach Director, provided a handout on the current outreach resources, and events sponsored and participated in by staff to promote LDVA programs. The handout noted the department's participation at the Veterans Service Organizations' annual department conventions; participation in three job fairs and two Yellow Ribbon conferences; the launch of LDVA's new website; approximately 15,000 LDVA benefits booklets given out around the state since January 2009; the LDVA-sponsored Women in Military Forum held in Pineville in April; and the awarding of approximately 12,725 honor medals. Mr. McNaughton also mentioned plans being made to host a conference with the VSO leaders (Commanders and Adjutants).

It was motioned by Mr. Abshire, seconded by Ms. Lonnette, to accept the Outreach Report as presented. The motion unanimously passed.

Communications Report. Ms. Keller, Press Secretary, provided the Members with a Communication Summary Report for the period of February 1, 2010 through June 30, 2010. The report covered marketing efforts to promote the Military Family Assistance Fund (MFAF), the Veterans Homes (mainly addressing complaints concerning the recent staff changes), the State Cemeteries (dedication of the carillon tower at the Northwest LA Veterans Cemetery and the upcoming groundbreaking of the Vernon Parish cemetery), and other general communications regarding the Honor Medal Program, Memorial Day, LDVA Outreach Tour, Women in Military Forum, and LAVETBIZ.

It was motioned by Mr. Huggins, seconded by Mr. Richard, to accept the Communications Report as presented. The motion unanimously passed.

IV. Other Matters/Adjournment

There being no further business to be brought before the Veterans Affairs Commission, Mr. Knott motioned and Mr. Abshire seconded that the meeting be adjourned into Executive Session. The motioned passed with 7 yeas, 0 nays.

The meeting adjourned at 12:00 noon.

/s/ Don A. Beasley, Chairman

/s/ Lane A. Carson, Secretary

November 17, 2010
Date of Approval

Minutes submitted by Charmagne Scott, AA6

