



VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMISSION

Meeting Minutes
September 11, 2014

I. Call to Order – Don Beasley, Chairman

The September 11, 2014, meeting of the Veterans Affairs Commission was called to order by Chairman Don Beasley at 3:56pm. The meeting was held at the Louisiana Department of Veterans Affairs (LDVA) Administrative Office, 602 N. 5th Street, Baton Rouge. The pledge of allegiance was recited in unison, followed by prayer by Commissioner Richard Garner. Roll was called by the Chairman. The following Commissioners' absences were noted as excused: William Detweiler and Lee Richard (illness), and Russell Henry.

Commissioners present: Don Beasley, Sulanda Lonnette, Richard Garner, Rudy Bourg, and Carroll Knott

LDVA Staff: David LaCerte, Secretary; Dustin Guy, Human Resources Director; Lisa Bruhl, Deputy Assistant Secretary/Homes; Al Leger, Deputy Assistant Secretary/Benefits; Robin Keller, Communications Director; Elizabeth Ellington, Public Information Officer; Mike McNaughton, Veterans Outreach Director; Charmagne Scott, Executive Assistant

Guests: Mrs. Betty Garner; Mrs. Silvana Bourg; Mr. Alton Rock, Department Commander, Military Order of the Purple Heart; Mr. Mitchell Cota, Department Commander, Veterans of Foreign Wars; Ms. Venetia Gooden, LA Legislative Auditor; Ms. Sarah D'Avy, LA Legislative Auditor

II. Approval of June 12, 2014, Minutes

The June 12, 2014, meeting minutes had been distributed to the Commissioners for review prior to the September 11th meeting. A motion was made by Mr. Bourg, seconded by Mr. Knott, to approve the minutes as distributed. The motion passed.

III. Division Reports

Human Resources (HR)/Fiscal. Mr. Guy reviewed the standard handout showing the vacancies within the Administrative Program and the five State Veterans Homes (SVHs) as of September 2, 2014. Vacancies in the Administrative Program totaled 13 and the SVHs' vacancies totaled 34. Mr. Guy also commented on significant changes to state employees' health insurance, effective January 1, 2015.

Since the last Commission Meeting, Secretary LaCerte stated two Administrative Office employees—Earnest Buckner, Regional Manager/Training Officer, and P.J. Charles, Troops to Teachers Administrative Coordinator—had resigned and moved out of state.

A motion was made by Mr. Bourg, seconded by Ms. Lonnette, to accept the Human Resources report as presented. The motion passed.

In the absence of Ms. Stephanie Wade, Chief Fiscal Officer, Mr. Guy reviewed the standard handout of the department's FY 2014-2015 operating budget. The total budget (including the SVHs) was \$60,697,375. As of August 27, 2014, approximately 17.1% (\$10,361,728) had been expended. Mr. Guy stated that all numbers for each budget unit were on target and there were no budgetary issues.

A motion was made by Mr. Bourg, seconded by Mr. Garner, to accept the Fiscal report as presented. The motion passed.

State Veterans Homes (SVHs). Ms. Bruhl briefed on her standard consolidated report that had been provided to Members for review prior to the meeting. All five facilities were currently undergoing six-year Legislative Performance Audits, with site visits having been completed at the Jackson and Jennings SVHs. The report also noted the highest occupancy rate was at the NELA Veterans Home/Monroe (97.44%), and the lowest occupancy rate was at the LA Veterans Home/Jackson (86.96%).

In other comments, Secretary LaCerte briefed on recent unannounced, overnight visits he made to the Jackson and Reserve homes based on unrelated complaints. He found everything to be in order at both facilities; however, a pest control contractor was hired to deep clean all residents' rooms at the Jackson facility to resolve pest/rodent complaints. Secretary LaCerte also mentioned that the Ancillary Committee at the Reserve home plans to fund a recreation building, with the assistance of some state funds; and the 610 KW generator is still on a flatbed pending permanent installation overseen by the Office of Facility Planning and Control.

A motion was made by Mr. Bourg, seconded by Mr. Garner to accept the SVHs report as presented. The motion passed.

State Cemeteries. A handout was submitted by Mr. Tim Johnson, Director of the NWLA Veterans Cemetery/Keithville, which provided a summary of interments for Fiscal Year 2013-2014. There was a total of 249 interments; 211 veterans, 38 spouses. Handouts of current operations/interments at the CENLA Veterans Cemetery/Leesville and SELA Veterans Cemetery/Slidell will be provided to the Members at a later date. Secretary LaCerte commented that the Slidell facility has been receiving inquiries from New Orleans regarding burial of homeless veterans. He plans to address a group of coroners in Baton Rouge next month and will push to have remains of veterans sent to our cemeteries.

A motion was made by Mr. Knott, seconded by Ms. Lonnette, to accept the State Cemeteries report as presented. The motion passed.

Troops to Teachers (TTT). Secretary LaCerte reviewed a handout of TTT's 4th quarter performance report covering the period April 1, 2014, through June 30, 2014. He noted that five candidates were hired by public school systems.

A motion was made by Mr. Garner, seconded by Mr. Bourg, to accept the Troops to Teachers report as presented. The motion passed.

Contact Assistance. Via handout, Mr. Leger reported the following:

- Ms. Barbara Benjamin has been hired as the Veterans Assistance Counselor (VAC) for Calcasieu Parish, replacing Mr. Ed White who transferred to Vernon Parish; Mr. Billy Robbins has been hired as the VAC for Ascension Parish, replacing Mr. Ken Marcantel who transferred to Livingston Parish; Mr. Earnest Buckner, former Capital Area Regional Manager/Training Officer resigned to accept a position with the Social Security Administration in New York (mentioned earlier during the Human Resources report); to date, two applications have been received for the SE Regional Manager position.
- There will be a homestead exemption amendment on the upcoming November ballot. If passed, Louisiana will allow veterans who are 100% unemployable and widows of deceased veterans who were 100% unemployable to claim an additional \$75,000 on their homestead tax relief.

Mr. Leger also reported there was no significant change in the Military Family Assistance Fund balance since the last meeting, except the receipt of a \$50 donation. With the addition of this donation, the fund balance is currently \$648,552.11.

A motion was made by Mr. Bourg, seconded by Mr. Garner, to accept the Contact Assistance report as presented. The motion passed.

Public Relations/Marketing. Ms. Keller introduced Elizabeth Ellington as the department's Public Information Officer. Her primary task will be managing the social media networks (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest) in an effort to reach younger veterans.

Town Hall meetings will be held on September 23 in Jefferson, Larose, and Belle Chasse. All feedback, findings, and recommendations will be compiled into an informal report and distributed to federal VA officials in Washington, DC, state VA Commissioners, state Veterans Service Organization (VSO) leaders, US and state elected officials, and local media. This report will also be presented at a tentatively scheduled meeting of the joint Louisiana House and Senate VA committees on September 26. Prior to the September 26th meeting, Secretary LaCerte will speak at a legislative hearing on September 17 and will ask legislators to subpoena and/or compel federal VA officials to be present at the September 26th joint committee meeting to answer questions regarding VA healthcare.

In the marketing area, standardized information packets for the State Veterans Homes are being finalized to be available at events and given to prospective residents and their

families; brochures for the State Veterans Cemeteries have been updated to include the SELA Veterans Cemetery/Slidell; and the LDVA benefits books have been updated and are available for distribution.

A motion was made by Mr. Bourg, seconded by Mr. Garner to accept the Public Relations/Marketing report as presented. The motion passed.

IV. Date of Next Meeting

No date was scheduled. Secretary LaCerte will contact the Commissioners with a suggested date for the next meeting.

V. Other Matters

No other matters were brought before the Commissioners.

VI. Adjournment

There being no further business to be brought before the Veterans Affairs Commission, a motion was made by Mr. Knott, seconded by Mr. Bourg, to adjourn the meeting. The motion passed and the meeting adjourned at 5:00 p.m.

/s/ Don A. Beasley, Chairman

/s/ David LaCerte, Secretary

04/16/2015

Date of Approval

Minutes submitted by Charmagne Scott, Executive Assistant. Copies of all handouts are filed with the Commission minutes and are available upon request.