



Louisiana Department of Veterans Affairs Veterans Affairs Commission

Meeting Minutes 21 March 2018

I. Call to Order – Rudy Bourg, Acting-Chairman

The March 21, 2018 meeting of the Veterans Affairs Commission was called to order by Acting Chairman Rudy Bourg at 10:03 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, followed by a short prayer from Billy Robbins. Roll call of members was conducted by Rudy Bourg.

Commissioners present: Rudy Bourg, William Detweiler, Ryan Bessinger, Ray Bass, Sulanda Lonnette, Paul Herman.

LDVA Staff: Joey Strickland, Secretary; Homer Rodgers, Undersecretary; Julie Baxter-Payer, Executive Counsel; Lisa Bruhl, Deputy Assistant Secretary/Veterans Homes; Alex Juan, Communications Director; Vanessa Melancon, Deputy Assistant Secretary/Benefits; Bill Dixon, State Approving Agency (SAA) Director; Holly Talley, Executive Management Officer; English Josey, Internal Auditor; Dustin Guy, Human Resources Director; Billy Robbins, Cemeteries Program Director; Barry Robinson, Capital Area Regional Manager/Training Officer; and Charmagne Scott, Confidential Assistant; Stephanie Wade, Chief Financial Officer; English Josey, Internal Audit Manager.

Guests: Dale Vande Hey, Dept. of Defense South Central Region State Liaison.

II. Introductory Remarks- Secretary Joey Strickland

Secretary Strickland welcomed Commissioners. He gave an overview of the status of the department and recognized the new members of the VA Commission. There are 4 new Commissioners that have joined since the last meeting in September. The new At-Large members represent the Veterans of Louisiana within their war group and/or age group. The Commissioners from the various Veterans service organizations, represent their organizations and their membership.

III. Election of New VA Commission Chairman and Vice Chairman

Don Beasley, resigned from the VA Commission at the September 2017 meeting. Mr. Herman made the motion to nominate Rudy Bourg as the next chairman of the VA

Commission. It was seconded by Ms. Lonnette. There was no objection. Mr. Bourg was unanimously elected as the new chairman.

Mr. Bourg nominated Richard O'Brien to serve as the Vice Chairman of the Commission. A motion was made by Mr. Detweiler to accept his nomination. It was seconded by Ms. Lonnette. There was no objection.

Secretary Strickland will notify Mr. O'Brien of his election as Vice Chairman, since he was unable to attend the meeting due to recovering from surgery.

IV. Approval of September 12, 2017 Minutes

The September 12, 2017 meeting minutes were distributed to the Commissioners for review. One correction to be made to remove LDVA staff member Stephanie Wade from the list of attendees. She was not present. A motion was made by Mr. Herman, seconded by Mr. Detweiler, to approve the minutes as distributed with one correction. The motion passed unanimously.

V. Division Reports

Human Resources (HR)/Fiscal. The standard handout showing vacancies within the Administrative Program and the five State Veterans' Homes (SVHs) as of March 16, 2017. Vacancies for the Administrative staff total only 4 vacancies. The vacancies were in: Admin-Contact Assistance- 2 VAC's (Iberia and Calcasieu); Claims- Paralegal (interviewing), and SAA: Admin. Program Specialist (interviewing). Mr. Guy noted the vacancies at the Veterans Homes in the nursing division are 93% filled. In December 2017, LDVA HQ HR completed a very good Civil Service Full Program Audit.

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

Stephanie Wade gave overview for Fiscal Department. LDVA has 30.5% (\$ 20,834,177) of the FY 2017-18 budget remaining. There are total commitments of \$47,470,902 (69.5%). The MFA Fund as of March 8, 2018, has disbursements totaling \$90,689.58, leaving \$24,838.42 remaining for the FY ending 30 June 2018.

A motion was made by Mr. Herman, seconded by Ms. Lonette to accept the Fiscal report as presented. The motion passed unanimously.

State Cemeteries. The standard handout concerning the status of the 4 LDVA Cemeteries as of March 2018. Mr. Robbins reported the SE LA Veterans Cemetery in Slidell remains the busiest of the states 4 cemeteries. It has had a total of 451 interments in its 3 years in existence. This has led to the need to expand because at the current rate, they will run out of space by the end of 2018. The expansion should start in May/June. The erosion issues at the cemetery in Rayville are set for the bid process to begin next week for those repairs. The new cemetery in Jennings is in the planning stages. It will be 22 acres, only 10 will initially be developed. Goal is for the cemetery to be complete by Fall 2019.

Incarcerated Veterans Program. Mr. Robbins reported that there have been visits to 6 prisons in the state. Secretary Strickland has made 2 visits to Angola. Barry Robinson and Mr. Robbins serve as the liaisons for LDVA to Incarcerated Veterans in Louisiana. Mr. Robbins and Julie Baxter Payer have attended Veterans Court in Lake Charles. There are not a lot of active Veterans courts currently, but LDVA is working to make these courts more active around the state.

A motion was made by Mr. Detweiller, seconded by Mr. Herman, to accept the State Cemeteries report as presented. The motion passed unanimously.

State Veterans Homes (SVHs). Ms. Bruhl briefed on her standard consolidated report. Also, copies of demographic information for all facilities were provided to the Commissioners. Ms. Bruhl introduced Murphy Haydel as the new RN Program Coordinator to assist Linda Theriot with nursing compliance. Ms. Bruhl highlighted activities at each facility:

Southwest Veterans Home (Jennings):

- The Capital Outlay projects have proceeded from Program Completion to Schematic Design (the next step/phase). The dates of the Design Development Phase submittals (the next step) are as follows:
 1. A Walk in the Park: 02/22/18
 2. HVAC Replacement: 02/16/18

Louisiana Veterans Home (Jackson):

- Wing 1-Remediation/remodel project: Progress continues with construction on Wing 1 with a completion date of April 10, 2018.
- Nurse call system- The pre-bid conference was held in late February with several vendors participating and the bids will go out soon.
- Camera/Surveillance project went out for bid on March 1st.
- Kitchen drainage project – Facility Planning & Control has put the project out for bid.
- Water well project- Work is to begin once approved by OSP.
- VFW Auxiliary National President, Dee Guillory visited and toured the facility on 2/12/18.

Northeast Veterans Home (Monroe):

- Pharmacy: VA sharing agreement has been completed and the facility will soon order medications to stock the pharmacy before opening.
- Capital Outlay Projects:
 - 1) Cooler Tower/Generator is in the design phase once it is completed it will be sent to Facility Planning & Control for approval and then it will be put out for bid.
 - 2) Awning project has been submitted for bid.
 - 3) The walk-in cooler/freezer has not been started yet.
- New Medical Director will begin on 3/1/2018.

Northwest Veterans Home (Bossier City):

- Pharmacy: VA sharing agreement has been completed and the facility will soon order meds to stock the pharmacy before opening.
- Painting project on facility walls to replace the wallpaper on Wing 1 is currently out for bid.
- Monica Lewis has accepted the Assistant Administrator position and will start in mid-March.

Southeast Veterans Home (Reserve):

- Annual VA Survey was conducted 2/21 – 2/23 and the facility is pending final report.
- Emergency Project: Replacement of Cooling Towers; working through the project with Facility Planning & Control.

A motion was made by Mr. Herman, seconded by Mr. Bessinger, to accept the SVHs report as presented. The motion passed unanimously.

Contact Assistance/MFA Fund. The standard handout concerning the status of Contact Assistance was provided to the Commissioners. Vanessa Melancon reported the Contact Assistance is hard at work ensuring Louisiana’s veterans and their dependents are able to access the benefits they have earned. All but our newest VACs are accredited with at least one service organization. More accreditations are pending for the graduates of our most recent VAC school class. We are looking at ways to expedite our VAC training, using materials already available online, allowing new hires to get accredited much faster. This fiscal year to date, Contact Assistance has processed 106,568 claims—23,630 more than last year at this time, despite a declining veteran population. The number of contacts has dropped by 10,618 to 123,522; however, the total number of communications by mail/email has increased by 3,090 to 13,459. This year, our goal is to modernize as many processes as possible, using available technologies to save both time and money. We are also focused on improving customer service throughout the division by providing VACs with consistent, clearly communicated expectations and training.

A motion was made by Mr. Detweiller, seconded by Mr. Bessinger, to accept the Contact Assistance report as presented. The motion passed unanimously.

Military Family Assitance Fund. Ms. Talley reviewed the MFA Fund report, which showed a current balance of \$406,380.50, as of March 28, 2017. Donations to date for this current fiscal year totaled \$66,195.69, and expenditures totaled \$90,689.58. Expenditures were: MFA Need Based \$8,971.73.

LA Veterans Honor Medal Program. Ms. Talley reported that a total of 153 Honor Medals have been awarded since January 2018. The Reserve and Jennings Homes have held monthly ceremonies for the new residents. The other 3 homes have put a hold on ceremonies due to concerns of spreading the flu among residents. LDVA will be

participating in a ceremony on 28 March at Barksdale Air Force Base with Governor John Bell Edwards to honor 28 Veterans. Mr. Bourg suggested adding a portion to the report to separate out specific ceremonies that have taken place.

A motion was made by Ms. Herman, seconded by Mr. Bessinger, to accept the Military Family Assistance Fund and Honor Medal report as presented. The motion passed unanimously.

State Approving Agency. Bill Dixon reported on SAA. The Louisiana Department of Veterans Affairs, State Approving Agency (SAA), Veterans Education and Training, has completed its 2017 FY contract. Based on the result of contractual obligations carried out or performed during FY 2017, the VA and JPRG has assigned the SAA a rating of Satisfactory. This is the highest rating an SAA can receive. The SAA has approval, supervision and compliance survey responsibility for over 400 approved schools and training establishments within the State of Louisiana. SAA's completed active facility count for FY2018 with a grand total of 252 active facilities

A motion was made by Mr. Herman, seconded by Ms. Lonette, to accept the State Approving Agency report as presented. The motion passed unanimously.

Internal Audit. English Josey discussed Audit Projects Conducted in Second and Third Quarters, FY 2018: Completed Monthly Audits of the Resident Aging Balances of the Accounts Receivable at each of the five Veterans Homes; Completed the audits of P-Cards Administration at HQ and each of the Veterans Homes; Reported on the compliance with the Meal Ticket Revenue Policy at the Veterans Homes; Reported on the Follow-up Audit of Asset Protection at the Veterans Cemeteries; Reported on Full Audit of P-Card Transactions at SELVH; Finalized the Fiscal Model for the Risk Based Audit Plan, as required by IIA Standards.

A motion was made by Mr. Detweiller, seconded by Mr. Bessinger, to accept the Internal Audit report as presented. The motion passed unanimously.

Executive Counsel Julie Baxter Payer reported that LDVA is working to work on issues that are going on at some of the homes. Ms. Payer also briefed on the upcoming legislative session and some of the bills that LDVA will be watching.

A motion was made by Mr. Herman, seconded by Mr. Detweiller, to accept the legal report report as presented. The motion passed unanimously.

Communication/Women Veteran Outreach. Ms. Juan reported LDVA's Communications Department continues to make improvements to the ways that disseminate information and reach military families. Recently, several of our stories have been picked up the U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs and shared on their social media sites. Last month, we were able to print and distribute updated benefits booklets to all of our Parish Service Offices. These booklets have become hot ticket items and are being requested by military families and service organizations as a recourse guide.

LDVA's Women Veterans Outreach Coordinator continues to focus our time and resources on supporting women veterans and their meetings/events across the state. She also spends a lot of time educating veterans about resources that are available to them and helping them expand their available support networks. She also coordinated a VETogether for the premiere of Suicide: The Ripple Effect documentary premiere in Baton Rouge on Feb. 23, helped the Alexandria VA Medical Center launch their "It's Up To Us" campaign to help stop harassment at VA medical facilities on Feb. 28, and will be presenting a flash session on women veterans issues at the National Association of Mental Health conference in New Orleans on June 29.

A motion was made by Mr. Herman, seconded by Mr. Bessinger, to accept the Communication and Women Veteran Outreach reports as presented. The motion passed unanimously.

VI. Other Matters

Secretary Strickland briefed the Commissioners in the "Welcome Home" Vietnam Veterans Day Ceremony that will be taking place at the LA Veterans Memorial Park. He stated that due to possible inclement weather that day, the venue could change but the ceremony would continue as planned.

Discussion was had between Commissioners and LDVA leadership for the next Commission meeting to take place on 11 July 2017 at 10:00 am. It was decided that this would be the best time, as it was in between many of the VSO conferences.

VII. Adjournment

There being no further business to be brought before the Veterans Affairs Commission, a motion was made by Mr. Bessinger, seconded by Mr. Herman, to adjourn the meeting. The motion passed and the meeting adjourned at 12:06 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.