



VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMISSION

Meeting Minutes

June 12, 2014

I. Call to Order – Don Beasley, Chairman

The June 12, 2014, meeting of the Veterans Affairs Commission was called to order by Chairman Don Beasley at 10:00 a.m. The meeting was held at the Comfort Inn/Suites Hotel, 34579 Grantham College Road, Slidell, Louisiana, prior to the grand opening ceremony of the Southeast Louisiana Veterans Cemetery. The pledge of allegiance was recited in unison, followed by prayer by Commissioner Precilla Wilkewitz. Roll was called by the chairman. The following Commissioners' absences were noted as excused: William Detweiler and Sulanda Lonnette (out of town); and Carroll Knott (illness).

Commissioners present: Don Beasley, Russell Henry, Richard Garner, Rudy Bourg, Precilla Wilkewitz, and Lee Richard.

LDVA Staff: David LaCerte, Secretary; Dustin Guy, Human Resources Director; Stephanie Wade, Chief Fiscal Officer; Lisa Bruhl, Deputy Assistant Secretary/Homes; Al Leger, Deputy Assistant Secretary/Benefits; Earnest Buckner, Capital Area Regional Manager/Training Officer; Tim Johnson, Director, Northwest LA Veterans Cemetery; and Charmagne Scott, Executive Assistant.

Guests: Mrs. Betty Garner and Mrs. Carrie Richard

II. Approval of December 3, 2013, Minutes

The December 3, 2013, meeting minutes had been distributed to the Commissioners for review prior to the June 12th meeting. A motion was made by Mr. Bourg, seconded by Mr. Richard, 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 May 27, 2014. Vacancies in the Administrative Program totaled 13 and the SVHs' vacancies totaled 33. Current projects being conducted by the HR division include staffing the Southeast LA Veterans Cemetery/Slidell; updating policies and procedures; hurricane preparedness; and preparation for the 2014 legislative session.

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

Ms. Wade reviewed the standard handout of the department's FY 2013-2014 operating budget. The total budget (including the SVHs) was \$57,981,926. As of May 23, 2014, approximately 86.3% (\$50,033,192) had been expended. Ms. Wade noted that LDVA was currently operating under an Executive Order hiring/expenditure freeze, but the SVHs were exempt.

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

State Veterans Homes (SVHs). Ms. Bruhl reviewed the consolidated SVHs report. The census per facility as of May 27, 2014, was as follows:

Facility	Bed Capacity	Current Census	Available Beds
LWVH/Jackson	161	138	23
NELWVH/Monroe	156	150	6
SWLWVH/Jennings	156	143	13
NWLWVH/Bossier City	156	144	12
SELWVH/Reserve	156	143	13

Ms. Bruhl also commented on current projects at the facilities.

- The contractor is ahead of schedule on the fire alarm replacement project at the Monroe facility.
- The fire panel system at the Jackson facility is being updated to comply with changes to the Louisiana Fire Safety coding requirements; the updates include installation of a new fire/smoke alarm system, changing out smoke/heat detectors; and tying in smoke doors to the new system. Also, all hot water heaters are being replaced for the residents' showers and the kitchen.
- Installation of four vestibules on the north side wings at the Bossier City facility is near completion. Ms. Bruhl acknowledged Chairman Beasley's major role in having this project funded through a generous donation from the Disabled Veterans of Louisiana.
- Installation of a 610kw generator at the Reserve facility is being coordinated by the Office of Facility Planning/Control and Crumb Engineering, LLC.

Secretary LaCerte added that a recent nationwide survey showed that nursing homes in Louisiana ranked 49th, but the SVHs were an exception. A motion was made by Mr. Richard, seconded by Mr. Bourg to accept the SVHs report as presented. The motion passed.

State Cemeteries. Mr. Tim Johnson was introduced as the new director of the Northwest LA Veterans Cemetery/Keithville, effective April 16, 2014. Mr. Johnson commended Mr. Don Howard, Troops to Teachers Director, and Mr. Mike Richardson, NW Regional Manager, for overseeing operations at the cemetery prior to his employment. He also acknowledged Ms. Sherrie Dixon for providing administrative support in addition to performing horticultural duties. Via handout, Mr. Johnson reported that interments for FY 2013-2014 as of May 28, 2014, totaled 221 (189 veterans; 32 spouses). The facility surpassed the 1300th mark in interments since its opening, with a total of 1,312 as of May 28, 2014.

In other comments, Mr. Johnson stated that the cemetery upgrades, funded by an operations/maintenance grant from the federal VA, had been completed. Secretary LaCerte commented on his disappointment with the contractor's work on this project and his decision to withhold final payment until all issues are addressed.

Via handout on the Central LA Veterans Cemetery/Leesville, Secretary LaCerte reported the number of interments for FY 2013-2014 as of May 27, 2014, totaled 169. He added that the demand for burials at this facility is not as great as anticipated. Secretary LaCerte also reported that the final master plans for the Northeast LA Veterans Cemetery/Rayville are anticipated to be completed in July and a contractor selected in October. The initial concerns regarding flood elevation and drainage issues on the proposed property have been resolved.

A motion was made by Mr. Bourg, seconded by Mr. Henry, to accept the State Cemeteries report as presented. The motion passed.

Troops to Teachers (TTT). Secretary LaCerte reviewed handouts of TTT's FY 2013-2014 quarterly performance report as of April 21, 2014. He noted that seven candidates were hired by public school systems during the second quarter (October 1, 2013-December 31, 2013); and four candidates were hired during the third quarter (January 1, 2014-March 31, 2014).

A motion was made by Mr. Richard, 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:

- Eleven (11) new Veterans Assistance Counselors (VACs) have been hired and servicing the following parishes: Ascension, Caddo, Calcasieu/Beauregard, East Baton Rouge, Jeff Davis/Southwest LA Veterans Home, Northeast LA Veterans Home, Ouachita, St. Bernard/Plaquemines, Vermilion, Vernon, and Webster. Each one successfully completed the VAC Training School held in March. A Military Order of the Purple Heart (MOPH) service officer and Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) representative also participated in the training school. Secretary LaCerte encouraged the Commissioners to suggest that their organizations' department service officers participate in the training school.

- During FY 2013, Louisiana exceeded the \$1 billion mark (approximately \$1,016,206,000) in compensation and pension benefits paid directly to its veterans by the federal VA. Mr. Leger commended the efforts and services provided by the parish VACs and specifically mentioned Mr. Matt Cole, St. Tammany Parish VAC, who assisted a Vietnam veteran in filing an original VA claim and netting \$702,000 in back pay, with no appeals required.

Mr. Leger then gave an update on the Military Family Assistance Fund (MFAF) as of May 6, 2014, via handout. The starting balance as of August 15, 2013, was \$583,439.31; donations totaled \$82,785.34; expenditures totaled \$17,722.54; and the current fund balance was \$648,502.11. The expenditures included payment for two need-based claims.

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

Public Relations/Marketing. In the absence of Ms. Robin Keller, Communications Director, Secretary LaCerte reviewed the Public Relations/Marketing Report via handout. He noted that the first interment at the new Southeast LA Veterans Cemetery will be held on June 21st for USMC Sgt. Michael Guillory of Pearl River, who was killed in action on December 14, 2012. He also commented on the recent allegations regarding secret wait lists at the VA medical centers. The hospitals in Louisiana have been flagged for further review, and LDVA will closely monitor and keep the veteran community informed as more information becomes available. A public hearing has been tentatively scheduled for June 27th at the State Capitol in an effort to brief state legislators on this situation. To date, federal VA officials have declined to attend.

IV. Date of Next Meeting

Mr. Beasley requested the Commission meetings resume its quarterly schedule and suggested the next meeting be held during the first week in September. The LDVA staff will notify the Commissioners when a final date is scheduled.

V. Other Matters

- Secretary LaCerte commented on three LDVA-sponsored bills that passed during the recent legislative session:

Act 312 establishes the Military Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry for the purpose of outreach, education, and advocacy for Louisiana's service members and veterans who have been exposed to open burn pit smoke and other airborne hazards during service in OIF, OEF, Gulf War, and other subsequent conflicts and theaters. He noted Louisiana is the first state to pass such legislation.

Act 252 authorizes certain military personnel or their spouses to terminate a residential lease agreement, and provides for the recovery of damages, remedies, and costs associated with the lease termination.

Act 716 establishes the Veterans Treatment Court Program to address the critical need for the criminal justice system to assist veterans with mental health issues, alcohol/drug addictions, substance abuse, etc., in an effort to reduce criminal recidivism and prison overcrowding. This legislation was supported by the district judges of Louisiana.

Secretary LaCerte announced that LDVA will host a Stand Down for Homeless Women Veterans event in New Orleans' Lower 9th Ward on June 14. Participants will provide information on benefits counseling, jobs, housing, and other resources. Federal VA personnel in the New Orleans area declined participation at the Stand Down, stating they will be sponsoring their own event in October.

- Commissioners Wilkewitz and Bourg opened a discussion on the in-state residency requirements and annual renewal of the hunting/fishing license for disabled veterans. Mr. Bourg stated that at one time, the license was free for life for 100% disabled veterans, but it now has to be renewed every year.

VI. Adjournment

Before adjournment, Mr. Beasley congratulated Mr. LaCerte on his appointment as LDVA Secretary on June 3rd upon the resignation of previous Secretary, Rodney Alexander.

There being no further business to be brought before the Veterans Affairs Commission, a motion was made by Mrs. Wilkewitz, seconded by Mr. Bourg, to adjourn the meeting. The motion passed and the meeting adjourned at 11:25 a.m.

/s/ Don A. Beasley, Chairman

/s/ David LaCerte, Secretary

09/11/2014

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.