



## VA Commission Meeting Minutes March 10, 2022

### I. Call to Order – Secretary Joey Strickland

The March 10, 2022 meeting of the Veterans Affairs Commission was called to order by Secretary Joey Strickland at 10:06 am. The meeting was held in-Person and via Zoom due to the emergency order in place due to COVID-19. The meeting opened with the pledge of allegiance recited in unison, led by Paul Hermann. Roll call of members was conducted by VA Commission Liaison Holly Talley.

Commissioners present in-person: Paul Hermann, Deron Santiny, Ray Bass, Sulanda Lonnette and Ryan Beissinger.

Commissioners present via Zoom: Mary Mills.

LDVA Staff in-person: Joey Strickland, Secretary; Julie Baxter-Payer, Deputy Secretary; Dustin Guy, Deputy Chief of Staff; Cleo Wallace, State Approving Agency (SAA) Director; Holly Talley, Executive Management Officer; Ted Krumm, Cemetery Director; William McInnis, Training and Development Officer; Stephanie Wade, Chief Financial Officer; Brandee Patrick, Communication Director; Larry Williams, Outreach Director. Lisa Bruhl, Deputy Assistant Secretary/Veterans Homes; Bradley Lemoine, Internal Auditor; Jessica Pierce, Internal Audit; Welma Jackson, Capitol Area Regional Manager; Lani Durio, Executive Counsel.

### 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. The staff are continuing to meet with veterans one-on-one to ensure that their needs are still met, while following all safety protocols set to ensure the safety of the veterans we serve and our staff. COVID-19 has not made for an easy time, but we are doing it and still serving Louisiana's Veterans.

### III. Approval of June 23, 2021 Minutes

The June 23, 2021 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.

#### IV. Division Reports

Operations and Legislative Update: Julie Baxter Payer gave an overview of operation of LDVA. The department is working well through the challenges with COVID-19 ensuring that we are work for and serving our Veteran's and not simply following procedures in place. Headquarters leadership are on daily/weekly calls within our agency and with state leaders throughout all of this to stay up to date on the things effecting our department and beyond.

Veterans Homes: Lisa Bruhl briefed the Commissioners on the status of each of Louisiana's Veterans Homes. And the various projects going on within the homes. She reviewed the protocols in place to ensure that the residents at each of the homes are safe and taken care of during the guidelines in place.

Veterans Cemeteries: Ted Krumm briefed the Commissioners on the status of each of Louisiana's Veterans Cemeteries. All cemeteries are conducting Committal Services and Military Honors with Social Distancing and masks. Cemeteries participated in Wreaths Across America modified their event to only be wreath placing with no ceremony. Various projects are taking place at the Veteran's cemeteries across the state. The VA request by the SELAVC in Slidell to add 2800 more crypts will be approved in October. The Cemetery is projected to be out of preplaced crypt space in June 2025. The expansion at the NWLAVC is in full swing and will add 1260 niches and 1520 pre-place crypts and many other improvements.

Legislative Update: Lani Durio gave an update on the 2022 Legislative session that will begin on Monday. LDVA is tracking several bills for this session. SB 171 by Sen. Foil is the sunset bill to recreate the department. SB 135 by Sen. Boudreaux will make technical amendments to the statues that govern MFA. HB 123 by Rep. Mike Johnson will clarify the LANG disability benefits as to who is eligible and when the service connected injury must have occurred.

State Approving Agency: Cleo Wallace briefed on the State approving Agency. The Louisiana Department of Veterans Affairs, State Approving Agency (SAA), Veterans Education and Training completed the FY2022 VACO/SAA Cooperative Agreement first quarter (October-December 2021). The LDVA's SAA program evaluates, and either approves or denies use of the GI Bill at Louisiana colleges, universities, and vocational training facilities to include On-the-Job-Training programs. This includes all institutions of Higher Learning (IHL), Non-College Degree (NDC), Flight School, On-the-Job Training (OJT)/Apprenticeship and License and Certifications.

Training & Development: The Training and Development Department recently completed its Regional training event in Alexandria, LA from 16 – 18 February 2022. We had multiple presenters where we cover everything from Compensation and Pension claim to State Benefits. We also cover internal system use to better help the Veterans Assistance Counselors help our Louisiana

Veterans. The training department has recently went through all LDVA forms to update and modernize all forms used in our VAC office. All forms have been recreated with the new LDVA logo and are in the process of being uploaded into our VetraSpec system.

Military Family Assistance Fund: Holly Talley briefed on the MFA Fund and response to Hurricane Ida. As of March 2022, MFA has assisted 51 Veterans and their families that sustained damages from Hurricane Ida in August 2021 and/or have need-based hardships. A total of \$ 131,674.39 has been granted in Ida assistance and \$ 27,855.75. The MFA Board met bi-weekly through December to ensure the timely processing of applications related to Ida due to the high volume of applications received.

Written reports were submitted to the Commissioners prior to the meeting for their review. The reports were submitted, but staff members did not brief on them during the meeting. Those reports are as follows:

|                                       |                                   |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Human Resources- Sy Wilson            | Internal Audit- Bradley Lemoine   |
| Fiscal- Stephanie Smith               | Communication- Brandee Patrick    |
| Contact Asst/Appeals- Earnest Buckner | Veterans Outreach- Larry Williams |
| Honor Medals- Holly Talley            | Accreditation/OJT- Welma Jackson  |
| LaVetCorps- Dr. Nikki Clark           |                                   |

A motion was made by Mr. Hermann, seconded by Mr. Bass to approve all reports as presented and submitted to the Commissioners. The motion passed unanimously.

#### V. 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 12:15 PM.

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