



VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMISSION

Meeting Minutes
December 3, 2013

I. Call to Order – Rudy Bourg, Vice Chairman

The December 3, 2013, meeting of the Veterans Affairs Commission was called to order by Vice Chairman Rudy Bourg at 10:30 a.m. 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 Mrs. Wilkewitz. Roll was called by Mr. Bourg. The following Commissioners' absences were noted as excused: Don Beasley (illness); Sulanda Lonnette (job assignment out of state); and Lee Richard (legal obligation).

Commissioners present: Rudy Bourg, William Detweiler, Richard Garner, Russell Henry, Carroll Knott, and Precilla Wilkewitz.

LDVA Staff: Rodney Alexander, Secretary; David LaCerte, Deputy Secretary; Dustin Guy, Human Resources Director; Stephanie Wade, Chief Fiscal Officer; P.J. Charles, Regional Coordinator/Troops to Teachers; Lisa Bruhl, Deputy Assistant Secretary/Homes; Al Leger, Deputy Assistant Secretary/Benefits; and Charmagne Scott, Executive Assistant.

Guest: Mrs. Betty Garner

Mr. Bourg recognized Mr. Alexander as the new LDVA Secretary and extended the assistance and support of the Commission whenever needed. Secretary Alexander expressed his appreciation to serve the Louisiana veterans in this new capacity.

II. Approval of September 17, 2013, Minutes

The September 17, 2013, meeting minutes had been distributed to the Commissioners for review prior to the December 3rd meeting. A motion was made by Mr. Knott, seconded by Mrs. Wilkewitz, to approve the minutes as distributed. The motion passed.

III. Division Reports

Human Resources/Fiscal. Mr. Lacerte stated the fiscal planning session is currently in progress for Fiscal Year 2014/2015, and he and Secretary Alexander will be meeting with officials at the State Budget Office later this date to discuss the department's budget requests. Mr. Guy then reviewed a handout showing the vacancies within the

Administrative Program and the five State Veterans Homes (SVHs) as of November 25, 2013. Vacancies in the Administrative Program totaled 16, which include four positions at the new Southeast LA Veterans Cemetery in Slidell (opening in 2014). Vacancies at the SVHs totaled 24. In other comments, Mr. Guy mentioned that staffing within the Cemeteries Program is currently being reorganized, specifically adding a manager at each facility. It is anticipated the reorganization will provide better management structure and distribution of work, resulting in increased efficiency. The Human Resources Audit conducted by the Department of Civil Service in November went well and a preliminary draft of the audit should be available soon. Ms. Lisa Bruhl has been hired as the new Deputy Assistant Secretary over the State Veterans Homes (SVH) division, effective December 2, 2013. She replaced Mr. Kevin Butler, who returned to employment in the private sector.

Mr. Bourg questioned if there was any update on the proposed reallocation/pay increase for the Veterans Assistance Counselors (VACs). Mr. LaCerte stated that Civil Service had determined that the VACs were adequately compensated for their level of work at this time. He also reported that all LDVA employees received a 3% merit increase effective October 1, 2013.

Ms. Wade reviewed the standard handout of the department's FY 2013-2014 operating budget. The total budget (including the SVHs) was \$58,182,213. As of November 22, 2013, approximately 40.8% (\$23,728,022) had been expended. The handout also noted that LDVA is currently operating under no Executive Order hiring or expenditure freezes/reductions; FY 2014-2015 Operating Budget and Capital Outlay Budget request documents have been timely submitted to the appropriate agencies; and LDVA is working with officials at the State Office of Facility Planning and Control and federal VA/National Cemetery Administration to secure a federal grant to construct the state veterans cemetery in Rayville (Richland Parish).

A motion was made by Mr. Detweiler, seconded by Mr. Henry, to accept the Human Resources/Fiscal reports as presented. The motion passed.

State Veterans Homes. Mr. LaCerte formally introduced Ms. Lisa Bruhl as the new Deputy Assistant Secretary over the State Veterans Homes. Ms. Bruhl, a licensed Nursing Facility Administrator, then gave a brief synopsis of her educational background and previous work history prior to employment with the LDVA.

A consolidated report provided by each SVH Administrator as of November 22, 2013, had been provided to the Commissioners. The report noted that the Monroe and Reserve facilities had recently passed annual surveys with zero deficiencies.

Mr. Bourg questioned if the law that was passed a few years ago to remove the word "War" from the official names of the Veterans Homes had ever been implemented. Mr. LaCerte stated the intent of the law, which was to allow admission of non-wartime veterans into the homes, has been implemented, though the official names were not

changed. A motion was made by Mr. Knott, seconded by Mr. Henry, to accept the SVHs report. The motion passed.

State Cemeteries. Secretary LaCerte presented the following cemetery project reports:

NELA (Keithville). Cemetery upgrades funded by an operation/maintenance grant from the federal VA is ongoing. Preparations are also being made for the Wreaths Across America event to be held on December 12.

SELA (Slidell). The grand opening of this cemetery is anticipated for March 2014. There had been some road issues, but they did not cause any major problems or construction delays.

NELA (Rayville). This project is moving forward, with plans to advertise for an architect by December 5 and have on board before Christmas 2013.

CENLA (Leesville). Via handout, the total number of burials for FY 2013 was 98, and the number of burials for FY 2014 (July-November 2013) was 29. The Wreaths Across America event will be held on December 14.

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

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

- All VACs and Regional Managers now have statewide email addresses, making communication with field employees more easier.
- By the end of February 2014, eleven (11) new counselors will be attending VAC Training School. This number could increase as a result of anticipated retirements and personnel departures.
- The VAC positions in Acadia, Winn, and Jackson Parish remain vacant and these offices are being supported by VACs from nearby parishes. More VAC positions could become vacant due to future budget cuts.
- Mr. Earnest Buckner, former VAC Supervisor at the EBR Parish Service Office, was promoted to Capital Area Regional Manager/Training Officer. He replaced Mr. Glenn Hebert, who accepted a position with the federal VA.
- Mr. Brian Martin, former Acadia Parish VAC, was promoted to VAC Supervisor in Lafayette Parish.
- Ms. Ashley Woods and Mr. Ken Wichterich, former St. Bernard Parish VAC, have filled Paralegal Counselor positions at the LDVA Claims Office in New Orleans.

Mr. Leger then gave an update on the Military Family Assistance Fund (MFAF) as of November 11, 2013, via handout. The starting fund balance for FY 2013-2014 (July 1, 2013) was \$583,439.31; donations plus interest totaled \$9,493.44; expenditures totaled \$10,978.50; and the current fund balance was \$566,429.93. He noted an increase in

applications for need-based claims, and a request for travel funds was expected before Christmas.

A motion was made by Ms. Wilkewitz, 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, Mr. LaCerte reviewed the Public Relations/Marketing Report via handout. The report showed the schedule of Christmas events to be held at each Veterans Home and the Wreaths Across America event at both cemeteries. It also provided an update on the VA Outpatient Clinics in Lafayette and Lake Charles. Congressman Charles Boustany introduced a proposal to the U.S. House Veterans Affairs Committee last month which would fully fund 27 VA clinics nationwide, including a new clinic in Lake Charles and an expansion of the Lafayette clinic. It is anticipated this proposal will pass favorably through the full House by Christmas 2013, and hopefully pass favorably by the full Senate. In the meantime, the Lafayette clinic will continue to operate under a lease agreement between the Alexandria VA Medical Center and the Lafayette Consolidated Government through April 30, 2014.

The Commissioners were provided a copy of the Korean War 60th Year commemoration book, Korea Reborn.

IV. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting date will be scheduled in conjunction with the grand opening of the SELA Veterans Cemetery in Slidell, which is anticipated for March 2014.

V. Other Matters

- Mr. LaCerte announced that Don Howard, director of the Troops to Teachers (TTT) Program, has relocated to Shreveport and his office will be domiciled within the administration building at the NELA Veterans Cemetery in Keithville. Mr. P.J. Charles was introduced as the Regional Administrative Coordinator of TTT. His office will be located at the LDVA Administrative Office.
- Secretary Alexander briefed on problems some funeral homes had been experiencing in obtaining flags from the US Post Offices. He encouraged the Commissioners to notify him if any problems are brought to their attention.

VI. Adjournment

There being no further business to be brought before the Veterans Affairs Commission, a motion was made by Mr. Henry, seconded by Mr. Detweiler, to adjourn the meeting. The motion passed and the meeting adjourned at 12:05p.m.

/s/ Don A. Beasley, Chairman

/s/ David LaCerte, Secretary

06/12/2014

Date of Approval

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