



VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMISSION

Meeting Minutes
February 23, 2013

I. Call to Order – Don Beasley, Chairman

The regular meeting of the Veterans Affairs Commission was called to order by Don Beasley, Chairman, at 10:00 a.m., on Saturday, February 23, 2013. The meeting was held at the Northwest Louisiana Veterans Home, 3130 AR Teague Parkway, Bossier City. After the pledge of allegiance and prayer, roll call was conducted by the Chairman. Six Commissioners were present. Commissioners Richard Garner and Russell Henry absences were noted as excused due to illness and out of town, respectively.

Commissioners present: Don Beasley, Carroll Knott, Sulanda Lonnette, Rudy Bourg, Lee Richard, and Precilla Wilkewitz.

LDVA Staff: David LaCerte, Interim Secretary; Amy Burris, Deputy Chief of Staff; Byron Hines, Administrator, NWLA Veterans Home

Guests: Mrs. Silvana Bourg, Mrs. Carrie Richard, and Ms. Connie Fauver (VFW).

II. Election of Vice Chairman

Due to the death of Charles Huggins last month, the Vice Chairman position was vacant. It was motioned by Mrs. Wilkewitz, seconded by Ms. Lonnette, that Mr. Rudy Bourg be elected as Vice Chairman by acclamation. The motion passed unanimously.

Secretary LaCerte commented that Mr. Bourg has been very active on the Commission since his appointment and will serve very well as Vice Chairman. Ms. Burris added that the Governor's Office and The American Legion had been notified of the vacancy and nomination process respectively.

III. Approval of Minutes

The minutes of the August 7, 2012, meeting had previously been distributed to the Commissioners for review. It was motioned by Mr. Bourg, seconded by Mr. Richard, to approve the minutes as distributed. The motion passed unanimously.

III. Division/Program Reports (all reports briefed by Secretary LaCerte unless noted otherwise)

Fiscal/Human Resources. The standard Fiscal/HR reports had been distributed to the Commissioners for review prior to the meeting. The FY 2012/2013 budget reflected a total budget of \$57,500,836; total obligations, \$34,673,813 (60.3%); and a free budget of \$22,827,023 (39.7%), as of February 7, 2013. Secretary LaCerte stated the LDVA budget was in good standing and there were no concerns at this time. The personnel report of full time employees reflected 101 authorized positions, 89 assigned positions, and 12 vacancies within the Administration, Claims, and Contact Assistance divisions; and a total of 30 vacancies at the State Veterans Homes, as of February 14, 2013.

Commissioners Knott and Bourg expressed concern regarding the Lafayette Parish Service Office and how the current Veterans Assistance Counselor (VAC), Steve Strowder, has been manning this office alone for a long time and is very overworked due to the heavy caseload and office visitors.

State Veterans Homes. Mr. Hines presented the standard State Veterans Homes System Report in the absence of the Mr. Kevin Butler and noted the following developments as of date:

- All five homes are currently at 89.2% occupancy collectively; a total of 88 deaths have occurred within the past 90 days.
- The SVH Administrators will be attending the National Association of State Veterans Homes Winter Conference in Washington, DC next week. Some of the discussions to be held with federal VA officials will be construction/renovations to the homes and the financial effects of the Affordable Health Care Act.
- The NELWVH/Monroe has cleared all outstanding deficiencies and is now in full compliance.
- An 800KW generator has been installed and is now fully functional at the SWLWVH/Jennings, capable of running 100% of the electrical load during a power outage. Installation of a full house generator is also complete at the NWLWVH/Bossier City.
- The fencing projects around the pond areas at the Bossier City and Reserve facilities are complete; and installation of wander guard systems has been completed at the Jennings and Reserve facilities.

CENSUS STATS PER HOME (as of February 23, 2013)

Facility	Bed Capacity	Current Census	Available Beds
LWVH/Jackson	161	137	24
NELWVH/Monroe	156	142	14
SWLWVH/Jennings	156	140	16
NWLWVH/Bossier City	156	140	16
SELWVH/Reserve	156	143	13

State Cemeteries. The State Cemeteries Report noted the following:

- The 1000th burial mark has been reached at the Keithville facility as of February 13, 2013. Burials are averaging 22 per month at Keithville and 6 per month at Leesville.
- A bid request for re-sodding and irrigation additions to the burial garden area at the Keithville facility has been submitted. These projects will be funded through an operations/maintenance grant from the federal VA.

Secretary LaCerte further remarked that assistance from the Commissioners is needed to promote the Leesville cemetery. The demand for services has fallen short of what was previously forecasted. Mr. Bourg suggested that Ms. Robin Keller, Communications Director, submit a press release periodically to the Leesville Times highlighting the cemetery.

Troops to Teachers. The Troops to Teachers report reflected 12 candidates were hired by public school systems between October 1-December 31, 2012; and the number of job fairs, presentations, and other contacts made by the TTT staff totaled 20 during this period. Secretary LaCerte complimented director Don Howard's accomplishments with this program since his hire.

Benefits Update. A handout prepared by Mr. Al Leger, Deputy Assistant Secretary/Benefits, noted that all parishes in the state are currently manned except Winn Parish (one VAC) and Lafayette Parish (one VAC Supervisor/Counselor). The Contact Assistance division assisted in bringing in over \$914 million in compensation/pension benefits last year. Secretary LaCerte stated that the \$1 billion mark will be reached or surpassed this year. He also commented that all VACs are now on the statewide email system.

Ms. Burris added that security is currently being addressed at the Pointe Coupee and Iberia Parish offices that house female staff working alone. Mr. Leger will address this matter with parish officials in the near future.

In other comments, Secretary LaCerte mentioned the federal VA will implement a new electronic filing system for benefits application by June. Paper applications will no longer be submitted. The new filing system will cut down on the claims backlog, ensure that records are not lost, and allow federal VA employees to perform their jobs more efficiently. LDVA has prepared for this transition by installing new computers and printers with more features and functions in most of the parish offices. Also, all service members, enlisted and commissioned, will now sign up for e-benefits upon entry into service, ensuring they will already be in the VA system at the time of their discharge and transition back to civilian life. This new implementation will be beneficial for better outreach, data tracking, and distribution of resources to veterans after service.

The handout on the Military Family Assistance Fund (MFAF) reflected the following:

FUND SUMMARY:

Starting Balance (July 1, 2012)	\$571,228.51
Donations to date	\$33,579.75
Expenditures to date	\$63,552.17
Fund Balance (as of 02/20/2013)	\$541,256.09

Secretary LaCerte noted that more charities have been added to the income tax forms which have impacted donations to the MFAF. Currently, there are two pre-deployment travel requests pending approval, and more requests are anticipated as National Guard deployments increase this year. Submission of need-based claims has decreased significantly. There has been a legislative amendment to the eligibility requirements in an effort to increase applications to the fund based on need, and marketing efforts have increased to ensure families are made aware of this fund if needed.

Public Relations/Marketing. The PR/Marketing handout highlighted the 2013 LA Women in Military Forum currently being held at the Diamond Jacks Casino Resort. Secretary LaCerte noted how pleased he was with the turnout. Also, the LDVA website has been updated; new features include online applications for the Veterans Honor Medal and MFAF, online job postings and resume uploads, and easier site navigation.

It was motioned by Mr. Richard, seconded by Mr. Bourg, that all division reports be accepted as presented. The motion passed unanimously.

IV. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting date will be set later, possibly in conjunction with the groundbreaking dedication of the Southeast Louisiana Veterans Cemetery in Slidell.

V. Other Matters

- Secretary LaCerte commented on his meeting with the VA Secretary in regards to the status of the Lake Charles and Lafayette VA Clinics during a recent trip to Washington, DC. Secretary Shinseki acknowledged the situation was bad and the veterans in these parishes were justifiably upset. Mr. Bourg stated he had spoken with Congressman Boustany regarding this situation and suggested an amendment be made in one of the Congressional house bills to add the VA clinics whose leases amounted to over \$1 million. There has been no confirmation on this request.

The LDVA Executive Budget will be submitted to the Legislature next month. Secretary LaCerte said the department was in good shape and there were no layoffs of

personnel. Also, the 2013 legislative package will be unveiled next week via a press release by the Governor and Secretary LaCerte.

Secretary LaCerte briefed on a situation that occurred at the Monroe veterans' home involving the Assistant Administrator. It appeared the Assistant Administrator had befriended and mishandled the resident's personal account with questionable spending activity. The employee resigned in lieu of termination and agreed to make restitution. The findings of the department's internal investigation will be turned over to the Ethics Board for further action if deemed necessary.

- A review of the need to re-establish subcommittees within the Commission is still pending and will be discussed at the next meeting.
- Reallocation/pay increases for the Veterans Assistance Counselors were denied by State Civil Service, who determined the VACs are currently compensated properly for their level of work.
- Mrs. Wilkewitz requested Secretary LaCerte check into claims that the East Baton Rouge Parish office was not assisting veterans properly and refusing to accept additional documentation for veterans' claims.

VI. Adjournment

There being no further business to be brought before the Veterans Affairs Commission, a motion was made and second to adjourn the meeting.

/s/ Don A. Beasley, Chairman

/s/ David LaCerte, Secretary

9/17/2013

Date of Approval

Minutes submitted by Charmagne Scott, AA6. Copies of all handouts are filed with the Commission minutes.