



## VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMISSION

Meeting Minutes

May 3, 2016

### I. Call to Order – Don Beasley, Chairman

The May 3, 2016, meeting of the Veterans Affairs Commission was called to order by Chairman Don Beasley at 10am. 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 Commissioner Garner. Roll call of members was conducted by the Chairman. Vice Chairman Rudy Bourg and Commissioner Bill Detweiler were not present and their absences were noted as excused.

**Commissioners present:** Don Beasley, Richard Garner, Russell Henry, Tom Green, Carroll Knott, and Wyatt Lobrano

**LDVA Staff:** Joey Strickland, Secretary; Homer Rodgers, Undersecretary; Charlie Dirks, Executive Counsel; John Nolan, Outreach Director; Lisa Bruhl, Deputy Assistant Secretary/Veterans Homes; Robin Keller, Communications Director; Al Leger, Deputy Assistant Secretary/Benefits; Bill Dixon, State Approving Agency (SAA) Director; Don Howard, Troops to Teachers (TTT) Director; English Josey, Internal Auditor; Linda Theriot, Director of Nursing Services; Stephanie Wade, Chief Fiscal Officer; Dustin Guy, Human Resources Director; and Charmagne Scott, Confidential Assistant

**Guest:** Mrs. Betty Garner, Mrs. Dianne Knott

### II. Introductory Remarks-Secretary Joey Strickland

Secretary Strickland expressed his appreciation of his return to Louisiana and being appointed head of the LDVA. After officially being sworn in as Secretary, he immediately addressed the current issues cited in the recent audit reports by the Office of Inspector General (OIG) and Louisiana Legislative Auditors (LLA). To date, he has met with key staff at all Veterans Homes and Cemeteries, and visited some of the parish service offices. Secretary Strickland briefly mentioned that erosion problems at the cemeteries in Rayville and Keithville are being currently being addressed, and major repairs are in progress at the cemetery in Leesville. A new position, which will be based in the LDVA headquarters office, has been created to oversee all of the state veterans' cemeteries.

### **III. Approval of December 16, 2015, Minutes**

The December 16, 2015, meeting minutes had been distributed to the Commissioners for review prior to the May 3, 2016, meeting. A motion was made by Mr. Knott, seconded by Mr. Green, to approve the minutes as distributed. The motion passed unanimously.

### **IV. Division Reports**

**Human Resources (HR)/Fiscal.** The standard handout showing vacancies within the Administrative Program and the five State Veterans Homes (SVHs) as of April 20, 2016, had been provided to the Commissioners for review prior to the meeting date. Vacancies in the Administrative Program totaled 4 and the SVHs' vacancies totaled 61. Mr. Guy noted the decrease in vacancies since the last meeting and added that 90% of the vacancies at the Veterans Homes are in the nursing division. He also mentioned the HR staff was finalizing several pay policies at the Veterans Homes to help with recruitment and retention, and revising special entrance rates and premium pay policies that will impact the Veterans Assistance Counselor (VAC) positions, as noted on his report.

Ms. Wade reviewed the standard handout of the department's FY 2015-2016 operating budget as of April 20, 2016, which had also been provided to the Commissioners prior to the meeting. She noted that approximately 80.4% (\$49,842,582) of the budget had been expended. In spite of proposed budget cuts, LDVA remains fully funded for the current and next fiscal year.

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

**State Cemeteries.** Handouts were submitted from the directors of the Northwest LA Veterans Cemetery/Keithville, the Southeast LA Veterans Cemetery/Slidell, and the Northeast LA Veterans Cemetery/Rayville that highlighted current/upcoming events and current interments. No report was submitted for the Central LA Veterans Cemetery/Leesville.

- Northwest LA Veterans Cemetery/Keithville had a total of 201 interments for FY 2015/2016, as of April 14, 2016.
- Southeast LA Veterans Cemetery/Slidell had a total of 654 interments as of March 31, 2016, since its official opening in June 2014.
- Northeast LA Veterans Cemetery/Rayville had a total of 37 interments since its official opening on November 10, 2015.

Undersecretary Rodgers noted that Mr. Tim Johnson now serves as the full-time director of the Rayville cemetery and Carol Martin has been detailed as director of the Keithville cemetery. Erosion problems at all cemeteries and computer issues at the Leesville cemetery are currently being addressed. LDVA has applied for a federal grant from FEMA in the amount of \$130,000 to assist with the problems at the Rayville cemetery. Mr. Rodgers also mentioned that expansion of the Slidell cemetery will be necessary in the next two to three

years based on the increasing number of burials. LDVA will apply for a federal VA grant to fund the expansion.

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

**State Veterans Homes (SVHs).** Ms. Bruhl briefed on her standard consolidated report that had been provided to the Commissioners for review prior to the meeting. Also, copies of demographic information for all facilities were provided to the Commissioners. Ms. Bruhl highlighted activities at each facility:

Northwest LA Veterans Home/Bossier City

- Facility occupancy: 92%
- The facility celebrated its ninth year anniversary on April 9.
- The federal VA recently completed its annual survey and the outcome was very good; the past four CMS annual surveys have been deficiency free.

Northeast LA Veterans Home/Monroe

- Facility occupancy: 97%
- The interior door replacements and parking lot expansion projects have been awarded and preparations are being made to begin these projects.
- The facility's annual Memorial Day Program will be held on May 28 at 10am.

Southwest LA Veterans Home/Jennings

- Facility occupancy: 93%
- The chapel expansion project was completed on April 6 and the first Mass was held on April 13.
- The federal VA survey was conducted during the first week in April and it was deficiency free.
- The annual Memorial Day Program will be held on May 27 at 9:30am.

LA Veterans Home/Jackson

- Facility occupancy: 84%
- The Memorial Day Program will be held on May 27 at 10am.
- Facility upgrades (pressure washing, painting, cleaning of lower pond area, etc.) continue to be performed by the maintenance staff.

Southeast LA Veterans Home/Reserve

- Facility occupancy: 95%
- The recreational building project, handled through the Office of Facility Planning and Control, continues to progress.

- The annual VA survey was held in February and the staff has completed the Plan of Correction for issues that were cited.
- The Memorial Day Program will be held on May 27; the World War II musical performers, “The Victory Belles,” have been confirmed to perform.

Ms. Theriot, Director of Nursing Services, reported on the hiring of three new Directors of Nursing (DONs). Mr. Chad Beckley, RN, has been hired as DON at the Monroe facility and began working in mid-April. He has an extensive background in wound care. Mr. Jeff McGee, RN, was named DON at the Jennings facility, effective April 4. Mr. McGee has a total of 13 years of nursing experience and has been employed at the Jennings facility for 4 years. Based on his knowledge in the area of Medicare, Mr. McGee will conduct training at the other Veterans Homes. Dr. Melissa Stewart was hired as DON at the Jackson facility, effective May 2. Dr. Stewart has an extensive background in long-term care and DON experience, and holds double Masters in Nursing Administration and Education, and a Doctorate in Nursing Practice. In closing, Ms. Theriot stated the supervisory nursing staff at all of the Homes will be more visible on the units.

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

**Contact Assistance/MFA Fund.** Mr. Leger submitted a handout showing the names and assigned parish service offices of new Veterans Assistance Counselors (VACs). He expressed appreciation to Secretary Strickland and Undersecretary Rodgers for meeting with and convincing Division of Administration (DOA) officials to restore funding in the Contact Assistance Program so that no VAC positions were lost to cuts. As of date, a total of 49 VACs works in the parish service offices and 6 Para-legal Counselors in the Claims Office in New Orleans.

Mr. Knott expressed concern that some VACs take it upon themselves to adjudicate claims and will tell veterans they do not qualify for benefits. If the same veterans seek assistance at another parish office, the claims are filed with the federal VA. Mr. Leger noted this concern and will address it with the Regional Managers and VACs.

Mr. Leger then reviewed the Military Family Assistance (MFA) Fund report, which showed a current balance of \$744,400.75, as of April 29, 2016. Donations to date for this current fiscal year totaled \$48,651.28, and expenditures totaled \$4,340. He noted a decline in requests for travel assistance funds due to the National Guard not having any deployments lately.

A motion was made by Mr. Henry, seconded by Mr. Green, to accept the Contact Assistance and Military Family Assistance Fund reports as presented. The motion passed unanimously.

**Internal Audit.** Before presentation of the Internal Audit (IA) report, Secretary Strickland noted that Mr. English Josey had been promoted to IA Manager and this division has been placed under the supervision of the Executive Counsel. Mr. Josey then proceeded to report

via handout provided to the Commissioners. He stated that audit projects continue in the areas of records management, the Title 29 State Educational Program, and payroll.

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

**Public Relations/Outreach.** Ms. Keller reviewed her standard handout of LDVA events and other public relations information since the last Commission Meeting. She announced that the “Women Veterans Day at the Capitol” event was scheduled for May 12, 2016, from 10am-2pm. Several vendors will be participating and Senator Regina Barrow will recognize and honor the contributions of Women Veterans.

Ms. Keller also commented on the upcoming launch of LDVA’s newly, redesigned website. She stated that new content management systems will allow more internal control and flexibility by staff to add pictures and other content to the site.

At the conclusion of her report, Ms. Keller announced her resignation as Communications Director, effective the end of May. It was at this time that Secretary Strickland also introduced Mr. John Nolan as LDVA’s new Veterans Outreach Director.

**Troops to Teachers (TTT).** Mr. Howard reviewed the TTT quarterly report for the period of January-March 2016 via handout. In addition to attendance at numerous job fairs and contact with direct stakeholders (i.e., military installations, school districts, state and federal agencies, etc.), Mr. Howard noted that there were three full-time placements during this period.

**State Approving Agency (SAA).** Mr. Dixon gave a brief overview of the functions of the SAA. He noted there are currently 258 approved schools in the state. The staff is now reviewing flight schools and pushing OJT and apprenticeship programs, since the number of veterans wanting to attend college has decreased. Mr. Dixon also announced the SAA program received the highest rating of satisfactory last year and Louisiana SAA will host the National SAA Conference in New Orleans in August.

A motion was made by Mr. Henry, seconded by Mr. Green, to accept the Public Relations/Outreach, Troops to Teachers, and State Approving Agency reports as presented. The motion passed unanimously.

## **V. Other Matters**

### **2016 Legislative Bills (Veteran/Military Related)**

Prior to reviewing the proposed legislative bills, Mr. Dirks briefed on his educational background and past employment. He had previously served as Executive Counsel at the Department of Children and Family Services before joining LDVA. Mr. Dirks also commented on the goals to be accomplished through his office, as established by Secretary Strickland; such as standard operating procedures for all LDVA divisions and evaluation of

all current legal contracts. At this time, his office is handling State Civil Service appeals resulting from disciplinary actions taken against employees based on the recent Louisiana Legislative Auditor and Office of Inspector General reports; and drafting a proposed Memorandum of Understanding between LDVA and Volunteers of America, for the purpose of establishing a partnership to expand services to veterans that LDVA does not provide.

Mr. Dirks then briefed on the handout showing the military/veteran related bills currently being considered during the Regular Session. In regards to House Bill 966, Mr. Dirks clarified this legislation is not assessing new fees to be charged to veterans for burial at the state cemeteries, but it will allow the LDVA to promulgate Administrative Rules, as required by law, regarding the charging of burial fees and waiver of fees in cases of financial hardship. He also noted that House Bill 1002, if passed, would expand the eligibility requirements of the Military Family Assistance Fund in an effort to increase the number of need-based applicants.

## **VI. Adjournment**

There being no further business to be brought before the Veterans Affairs Commission, a motion was made by Mr. Garner, seconded by Mr. Green, to adjourn the meeting. The motion passed and the meeting adjourned at 12:22pm.

/s/ Don A. Beasley, Chairman

/s/ Joey Strickland, Secretary

**February 7, 2017**

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Date of Approval

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