

Meeting Minutes
December 9, 2020

I. Call to Order – Rudy Bourg, Chairman

The December 9, 2020 meeting of the Veterans Affairs Commission was called to order by Chairman Rudy Bourg at 10:03 am. The meeting was held via conference call due to the emergency order in place due to COVID-19. The meeting opened with the pledge of allegiance recited in unison, led by Richard O'Brien. Prayer led by Commissioner Paul Hermann. Roll call of members was conducted by Chairman Bourg.

Commissioners present: Chairman Rudy Bourg, Vice Chairman Richard O'Brien, Mary Mills, Paul Hermann, Deron Santiny, Ray Bass, Sulanda Lonnette, Ryan Beissinger, and Mike Russell.

LDVA Staff: Joey Strickland, Secretary; Julie Baxter-Payer, Deputy Secretary; Dustin Guy, Deputy Chief of Staff; Lisa Bruhl, Deputy Assistant Secretary/Veterans Homes; Cleo Wallace, State Approving Agency (SAA) Director; Holly Talley, Executive Management Officer; Bradley Lemoine, Internal Auditor; Billy Robbins, Incarcerated Veterans Program Director; Ted Krumm, Cemetery Director; Barry Robinson, Training and Development Officer; Stephanie Wade, Chief Financial Officer; Brandee Patrick, Communication Director; Larry Williams, Outreach Director.

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 out staff. COVID-19 has not made for an easy time, but we are doing it and still serving Louisiana's Veterans.

III. Approval of July 14, 2020 Minutes

The July 14, 2020 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. LDVA has lost 1 employee to COVID-19 at the NWLA Veterans Cemetery. 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. All 5 VA homes are in line to receive the vaccine. The proposed budget for FY22 is in and our agency is working through the process.

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. No visitation continues within the homes.

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. For Veterans Day volunteer organizations placed flags at the gravesites and or the cemetery displayed their Avenue of Flags. Cemeteries that participate in Wreaths Across America will modify their event to only be wreath placing with no ceremony. Each participating cemetery will be available for visitors to place wreaths from 9a -12p. The expanded window for placing wreaths enables the Cemeteries to still participate but maintain social distancing. Masks will be worn by the staff and will be provided for those who want to place a wreath if they do not have one.

Veterans Outreach: Larry Williams briefed the Commissioners on the newly formed Veterans Outreach division. LDVA will continue to prioritize ensuring all veterans, support organizations, sister agencies, etc. across the state of Louisiana are fully aware of the services rendered. The focus areas of Veterans Outreach are Louisiana Gold Star Families, Louisiana Blue Star Family support, Veteran Homelessness Prevention, Women Veterans Outreach, Veteran Job Placement/Referrals and LaVetCorp Navigator Program support.

Military Family Assistance Fund: Holly Talley briefed the Commissioners on the fund balance and status of the MFA Fund. As of 30 November 2020, the MFA Fund had a balance of \$497,562.09. Expenditures to date for FY21 totaled \$22,664.40. This leaves a remaining spending authority amount of \$92,863.60. The \$1 donation with Louisiana Driver's licenses went into effect on 1 December 2020. This should help generate and sustain the fund balance for years to come to ensure that the fund can continue to assist Veterans and their families when they face undue financial hardships.

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:

Fiscal- Stephanie Smith

LaVetCorps- Dr. Nikki Clark

State Approving Agency- Cleo Wallace
Human Resources- Sy Wilson
Incarcerated Veterans- Billy Robbins
Contact Assistance- Earnest Buckner

Training- Barry Robinson
Honor Medals/Vets Park- Holly Talley
Internal Audit- Bradley Lemoine
Communication- Brandee Patrick

A motion was made by Mr. Hermann, seconded by Ms. Mills 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 11:34 AM.

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