

**MINUTES
of the
SECOND MEETING
of the
MILITARY AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

**July 13, 2017
Grant County Business and Conference Center
Silver City**

The second meeting of the Military and Veterans' Affairs Committee was called to order by Representative Rodolpho "Rudy" S. Martinez, co-chair, on July 13, 2017 at 9:01 a.m. at the Grant County Business and Conference Center in Silver City. Committee members and staff introduced themselves.

Present

Rep. Rodolpho "Rudy" S. Martinez,
Co-Chair
Rep. David E. Adkins
Sen. Craig W. Brandt
Sen. William F. Burt
Rep. Harry Garcia
Sen. Michael Padilla
Rep. Bob Wooley

Absent

Sen. Bill Tallman, Co-Chair

Advisory Members

Rep. Eliseo Lee Alcon
Rep. Randal S. Crowder
Rep. Jim Dines
Rep. George Dodge, Jr.
Sen. John Pinto
Rep. Jane E. Powdrell-Culbert
Rep. Dennis J. Roch
Rep. Debbie A. Rodella
Rep. Debra M. Sariñana

Rep. Cathrynn N. Brown
Sen. Carlos R. Cisneros
Sen. Richard C. Martinez
Sen. William H. Payne
Rep. Jim R. Trujillo

Staff

Jeret Fleetwood, Researcher, Legislative Council Service (LCS)
Peter Kovnat, Staff Attorney, LCS

Guests

The guest list is in the meeting file.

Handouts

Copies of all handouts and other written testimony are in the meeting file.

Thursday, July 13

Welcome and Introductions

Senator Howie C. Morales welcomed the committee to Silver City and Grant County and introduced local luminaries, some of whom spoke and welcomed the committee.

Las Cruces Vet Center

Lawrence Eres, counselor, Las Cruces Vet Center, provided the committee with some background information about the center, as well as a history of the organization. The Las Cruces and Silver City vet centers provide services to veterans in the southern part of New Mexico and in El Paso, Texas. A mobile vet center travels southern New Mexico and counties in Texas and Arizona. Mr. Eres said he personally has counseled about 1,400 visits since October 1, 2016.

Discussion turned to outreach efforts to homeless veterans and incarcerated veterans. Alan Martinez, deputy secretary, Veterans' Services Department (VSD), said that months before release from prison or jail, the department starts working with veterans to get their paperwork started while in jail and minimize lag time in services upon release. Committee members lauded Mr. Martinez for his efforts, and one legislator recommended that he work with the Parole Board because the Parole Board knows six months in advance when prisoners are expected to be paroled and what kind of living situation to which they would be returning.

Mr. Martinez said the VSD is working with the Corrections Department to provide wraparound services for veterans, which is in response to data showing high recidivism among veterans, at least partially because the wait for services is too long.

United Military Women of the Southwest

Carol Gaines of United Military Women of the Southwest said that her organization was able to raise capital outlay funds to supplement its other fundraising efforts.

Karen Woods of United Military Women of the Southwest said that women express themselves differently and often do not want the spotlight for military service. She lamented the fact that some female soldiers and veterans are survivors of abuse and said that women are being left out because of men's and women's attitudes.

Committee members recommended that the organization work with Melanie Suazo of the VSD and also said they were impressed with the organization's ability to get legislators to work together to spend capital outlay on the project at Veterans Memorial Park in Las Cruces. A legislator expressed regret that it has taken so long for there to be a memorial for female veterans.

Mr. Martinez said that Ms. Suazo is working hard at getting the word out and providing services to female veterans and that she has been to each county in New Mexico this year and is creating a buzz among female veterans.

New Mexico State Veterans' Home

Colleen Rundell, administrator, New Mexico State Veterans' Home, said that each state and Puerto Rico have veterans' homes. In 1985, the former Carrie Tingley Hospital in Truth or Consequences was renovated to become the New Mexico State Veterans' Home. That renovation, which housed four people to a room, with some rooms not having bathrooms, was not optimal.

Currently, the memory care unit has 20 beds and, due to its small size, has a waiting list. The veterans' home has a full-time doctor and onsite medical care, both of which help to catch illness early and prevent hospitalization. This is important, as hospitalization is particularly hard on this group.

The recently constructed annex, which has a planned opening of September 2017, has 59 private rooms with bathrooms, with many of those rooms dedicated to the memory care unit. The annex has many amenities, such as a thermal-water-fed swimming pool, and there are plans to add others, such as a bowling alley. The annex was paid for 65% by the federal government and 35% by the state. The layout requires more staffing, which is a challenge because of location. With the help of the VSD, the veterans' home has been able to start the state's rapid hire process, which can get turned around in two to three weeks, down from two to three months. Once there, however, staff turnover is low.

Ms. Rundell said that operations of the veterans' home are financially self-sufficient and that every decision made at the home is based on what is best for veterans.

Legislators discussed the great work being done at the home and asked Ms. Rundell for any recommendations she has. She recommended building another home in an area of the state with more veterans. There is great need, she said, and studies show that families will not put a relative in a home more than 50 miles from where the family lives.

Finally, Ms. Rundell said that support from the VSD has been great, and having that department oversee the home creates some distance between the home and the Department of Health, which licenses all nursing homes in the state.

Hidalgo Medical Services

Dan Otero, chief executive officer, Hidalgo Medical Services (HMS), said that the company was established in 1995 in Lordsburg, New Mexico, as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. HMS offers comprehensive, integrated and affordable health care. HMS has 14 locations in Hidalgo and Grant counties, and 3,100 out of 4,800 residents of Hidalgo County and 12,000 out of 29,000 residents of Grant County use its services. Currently, health care is available within 30 minutes for residents of the two counties.

As a federally qualified health center, HMS is required to provide care regardless of the patient's ability to pay. Currently, HMS provides comprehensive services and outpatient care,

including dental and behavioral health, and it is opening a substance abuse center called Su Casa in February 2018.

Mr. Otero said that HMS is one of four behavioral health locations in the state that is a "mental health home" and that it provides help to community members to avail them of non-health-care services provided in the community, such as access to housing, food and fitness facilities.

HMS is a federal Veterans Choice Program participant. If a veteran lives more than 50 miles from a Veterans Health Administration facility or the wait time is more than three months, with prior approval, the veteran can go to an HMS facility.

Committee members asked if there is an inventory of all providers in the two counties and if people are falling through the cracks as far as behavioral health. Mr. Otero said that there is an attempt to better coordinate behavioral health services to provide comprehensive care. He said that Grant County, for its part, has gotten local providers to properly provide comprehensive behavioral health services.

Certificate of Congratulations to Dan McBride

Representative Rebecca Dow presented a certificate of congratulations to Dan McBride.

Local Veterans Organizations

Armando Amador, Vietnam Veterans of America, Chapter 358, said that he started the chapter in 1990. Mr. Amador said that he was not considered a veteran when he left Vietnam and had to sign a waiver of benefits on his discharge form. He proceeded to ask for a congressional investigation into this issue, and, after 13 years, he finally received his benefits. But, he said, there are many others in the same situation that do not have the wherewithal to get their rights recognized.

Mr. Amador said that in Chapter 358 there are more than 100 combat veterans seeking treatment for posttraumatic stress disorder who meet weekly. After repeated requests, the El Paso Veterans Administration provided a combat veteran counselor. This was only after the Veterans Affairs office in San Bernardino, California, sent someone to see if Chapter 358 indeed had the number of veterans it claimed. It did, and it had the most veterans that the woman sent from San Bernardino had ever seen at a meeting.

American Legion, Post 18

Ray Davis, American Legion, Post 18, discussed the Santa Fe/Fort Bayard National Cemetery Support Foundation. The nonprofit organization helps to repair cemeteries without seeking or accepting support from the government.

Center for Student Success, Western New Mexico University (WNMU)

Mary Billings, director, Center for Student Success, WNMU, said that WNMU has a number of different groups that provide services to veterans. It has a veterans' center, which is a one-room location in the Juan Chacon building. WNMU is going to expand it during the next academic year and will add a lounge and library for veteran students.

Marine Corps League Gaffney-Oglesby Detachment #1328

Frank Donahue, Gaffney-Oglesby Detachment #1328, Marine Corps League, asked for help for the veterans of the Southwest. Started in March 2009, Detachment #1328 helps homeless and near-homeless veterans and provides scholarships for veterans and their families.

Disabled American Veterans Grant County/Fort Bayard Chapter 1

Formed in 1950 by World War II veterans, Disabled American Veterans Grant County/Fort Bayard Chapter 1 started seeking funds in June 2016, and one year later it has raised about \$5,000. A volunteer driver said that the Las Cruces, Truth or Consequences, Socorro and Silver City vans all coordinate and consolidate passengers to get to the Albuquerque Veterans Administration hospital.

Approval of Minutes

Upon a proper motion, seconded and without opposition, the committee approved the minutes from the previous meeting.

Adjournment

There being no further business before the committee, the meeting adjourned at 2:00 p.m., and members proceeded to take a tour of Fort Bayard.