

MINUTES
of the
FOURTH MEETING
of the
MILITARY AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

November 9, 2009
American Legion Post 10, Las Cruces, NM

November 10, 2009
Sgt. Willie Estrada Memorial, Alamogordo, NM

The fourth meeting of the Military and Veterans' Affairs Committee for the 2009 interim was called to order by Representative Thomas A. Garcia, co-chair, on Monday, November 9, 2009, at 10:20 a.m. at the American Legion Post 10 in Las Cruces. A voting quorum was present.

Present

Rep. Thomas A. Garcia, Co-Chair
Rep. Nathan P. Cote
Sen. Eric G. Griego (11/09)
Rep. Rodolpho "Rudy" S. Martinez (11/09)
Sen. John Pinto

Absent

Sen. David Ulibarri, Co-Chair
Rep. Elias Barela
Rep. Diane Miller Hamilton
Sen. William E. Sharer

Advisory Members

Sen. Rod Adair
Rep. Eliseo Lee Alcon
Rep. Thomas A. Anderson
Sen. Dianna J. Duran
Sen. Mary Jane M. Garcia (11/09)
Rep. Edward C. Sandoval

Rep. Karen E. Giannini
Sen. Richard C. Martinez
Rep. Kathy A. McCoy

Other Legislators

Rep. Andrew J. Barreras (11/09)
Rep. Jeff Steinborn (11/09)
Rep. Gloria C. Vaughn (11/10)

(Attendance dates are noted for those members not present for the entire meeting.)

Staff

Damian Lara, Staff Attorney, Legislative Council Service (LCS)
Karen Wells, Researcher, LCS

Guests

The guest list is in the meeting file.

Handouts

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

Monday, November 9**Welcome and Introductions**

Members of the committee and staff introduced themselves. Ken Miyagishima, mayor, Las Cruces, welcomed everyone to Las Cruces. Members of the audience introduced themselves. Representative Garcia invited Representative Steinborn to serve as the honorary chair for the morning.

Mission of the Vet Center in Southern New Mexico

Guy McCommon, team leader, vet center, described the center as a Veterans Administration (VA) center providing readjustment and counseling services. There are 290 such vet centers around the U.S., which provide counseling services for Vietnam veterans who do not wish to take advantage of services available at the VA hospital. Initially, vet centers were "drop-in" locations providing peer-to-peer counseling. Currently, vet centers are professionally and clinically staffed. He directed the attention of the committee to a new mobile vet center that is one of only 50 in the U.S.; mobile vet centers are intended to serve rural communities. This mobile vet center has the capability to be converted into an emergency response vehicle in the event of a natural or other widespread disaster. He invited committee members to tour the mobile vet center. He described the mission and effectiveness of the vet center and the mobile vet center. Committee members were provided with a sample outreach flyer.

Committee members acknowledged the wide geographical area for which the vet center is responsible and asked what priority areas of southern New Mexico the mobile vet center will serve. A schedule is being developed to provide the greatest access to veterans. Committee members noted that many veterans make long drives monthly to receive counseling services in Albuquerque. Mr. McCommon noted that in Las Cruces, volunteer veterans bring veterans in need of counseling to the vet center, and he expressed a desire to establish this mechanism elsewhere in the region. He noted the importance of veterans having the same counselor on an ongoing basis. Randy Reynolds, county coordinator for the VA clinic, was invited to join Mr. McCommon to answer questions regarding transportation services. Questions were asked about substance abuse treatment. The vet center does not provide substance abuse treatment; however, veterans in need of those services are referred to appropriate locations. Clarification was asked about sexual trauma and how it is identified. Generally, this information is self-disclosed; the vet center employs one counselor who is certified as a sexual trauma counselor. Observations were made about periods of service to one's country that do not qualify for consideration for services; Mr. McCommon noted that the qualifying periods of service are determined nationally.

Representative Garcia moved, and Representative Cote seconded, a motion that members provide the names of the omitted periods of service to Mr. Lara, and that Mr. Lara write a letter to the Department of Veterans Affairs, with copies to the congressional delegation, requesting the inclusion of these periods. The motion was adopted. A question was asked about the percentage of veterans being served who are in the criminal justice system and how the vet center works with them. Identification of these veterans is part of the outreach efforts. The vet center is working through the magistrate courts in Las Cruces. El Paso recently started a veterans' court. A committee member noted the effectiveness of veterans' courts and a hope that funding will be found in the future for veterans' courts in New Mexico. Clarification was sought regarding group counseling; counseling groups are conducted in Silver City and Truth or Consequences. It is hoped that more groups will be conducted in outlying areas as the mobile vet center is deployed.

Representative Garcia requested a moment of silence to honor the loss of Tony Carrasco, a New Mexico soldier who was killed in Iraq last week.

Veteran Homelessness

Pamela Angell, executive director, Mesilla Valley Community of Hope (MVCH), introduced Thomas Hazzel, executive director, Las Cruces Housing Authority, and Kim Whitman, an intern with the MVCH who is also a veteran. Ms. Whitman identified the services provided by the MVCH, including intensive case management and a day shelter in addition to housing. She provided statistics about the number of veterans served and the type of services most utilized. The mission of the MVCH is to provide a safe, stable and supportive home while also providing tools to become self-sufficient members of the community. Ms. Angell discussed the fragile funding for this transitional housing program. The MVCH was recently awarded a U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs grant of \$180,750 that is dependent upon state capital outlay matching funds. The funding will be used to renovate and construct apartments to house homeless veterans. Ms. Angell urged committee members to protect the capital outlay funding. She also identified ongoing needs for volunteer mentors, donated household goods and training and employment opportunities for the veterans. Mr. Hazzell added details about the capital outlay funding and the ability of the MVCH to use the funds. He emphasized the importance of keeping this funding in place, noting that housing vouchers to allow homeless veterans to obtain permanent housing are dependent on this capital outlay funding.

Committee members asked whether family needs as well as veterans' needs are being addressed. The MVCH is primarily for veterans who are not in family situations; however, the MVCH coordinates with other housing programs that do serve families. The difficulty of protecting the requested capital outlay funds was discussed. The importance of working to eliminate homelessness among veterans was recognized. Clarification was sought regarding the percent of domestic abuse victims who are males. It is difficult to know, as victims of abuse are reluctant to self-disclose; but it is a figure that is hoped to be identified. Committee members acknowledged that housing for veterans is a serious problem statewide and stated their hope that capital outlay for veterans could be protected.

Veterans Museum

Committee members were transported to the proposed site of the New Mexico veterans museum and to lunch at the Veterans Park.

Following lunch, the chair asked for approval of the minutes, with an amendment to reflect a recommendation that the VA Medical Center consider using the Miners' Colfax Medical Center (MCMC) in Raton as a VA clinic, and an invitation to the VA Medical Center to tour the MCMC to assess the potential for future uses of the facility. The minutes were approved as amended with no objection.

Colonel Joseph Long, U.S.M.C. (ret.), briefed the committee on the plans to build a veterans museum in Las Cruces. He provided the legislative history of the project and identified the mission of the museum, which is to honor and pay tribute to the service of New Mexico's veterans and to tell the story of New Mexico's rich military history. The process for and ultimate selection of a site was described. Funding will come from a variety of sources, including federal contributions and private funding sources and a hope for continued support from the New Mexico Legislature.

Committee members asked questions and made comments about elements of planning of the museum and exhibits to include in the historical story that is told. A desire was expressed to include the story of the Navajo Code Talkers, as well as the role played by the Irish in the Mexican-American War. Colonel Long noted that about one-half of the rough riders came from New Mexico. Those present in the audience who have been actively involved in the project were publicly thanked.

Higher Education for Military Personnel — GI Bills

Roberta Derlin, Ph.D., associate vice president for student success, New Mexico State University (NMSU), presented information about educational opportunities available to military students and veterans. Over 1,000 active duty military and veterans are enrolled in these programs at NMSU.

Eva Armijo, coordinator for student and veterans affairs, NMSU, noted challenges in the administration of these programs, including a lack of awareness of benefits available to veterans, processing of reimbursements, processing of post-9/11 certifications and the reporting fee.

Lieutenant Colonel Elise Wheeler, A.S.A.F. (ret.), director, Veterans Resource Center, clarified some information regarding these challenges and provided additional information from the perspective of the University of New Mexico (UNM). The \$7.00 processing fee is not sufficient to cover the costs of the programs.

Committee members noted that the GI bill has become much more complicated and comprehensive than it used to be. Active duty military are entitled to different benefits than are veterans; money to support these opportunities by and large goes to the universities. It is a very

complicated system now. Since the institution of the post-9/11 GI bill, participation has grown substantially. UNM has seen a 27 percent increase since last year in post-9/11 GI bill applicants.

Senator Griego made a motion to write a letter to request members of New Mexico's congressional delegation to assist with resolving the fee and implementation challenges brought to the committee's attention today. Senator Pinto seconded the motion. Representative Garcia requested that the motion be altered to ask for the committee to work with the presenters to craft the letter to the Department of Veterans Affairs and copy the congressional delegation. Senator Griego accepted the amendment. The motion was unanimously endorsed.

Further questions were asked about who is eligible for GI bill assistance, the kind of degrees being sought and how this educational opportunity has benefited veterans in the long term. The panel members noted the importance of retention in school and graduation from school for GI bill participants. Lieutenant Colonel Wheeler described her center as one that is dedicated to assisting veterans in transition to identify the resources that will help them the most. She thanked the committee members for their support and the passage of legislation that provides resident tuition support for veterans. She gets calls routinely from the rest of the country on how to replicate the program. A question was asked about ways to administratively simplify these programs and to make it easier for students to transfer from one school to another.

Public Comment

Arturo Terrazas, legislative assistant to Congressman Harry Teague, read a statement from Congressman Teague that thanked the committee and lauded the efforts of servicemen and servicewomen in New Mexico. The statement noted that he is a member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, which gives him a unique opportunity to address issues concerning the military and veterans. Congressman Teague has a special concern for the issue of homelessness among veterans, and he noted that he introduced a bill, HR 2504, to increase funding for programs that seek to eradicate homelessness among veterans. Another measure he introduced is HR 3906, which seeks to strengthen the ability of veterans to obtain home loans and funding waivers that are invulnerable to recall to active duty.

Jeronimo Del Bosque, Marine Corps League, described honor guard services the league provides at funerals on request. The league is underfunded at only \$50.00 per funeral. He asked for the committee's support to increase the funding. The chair moved that legislation be drafted for the November 30 meeting to meet Mr. Del Bosque's request. The motion passed unanimously.

Delano Garcia testified that Las Cruces stands to lose \$4 million in capital outlay funding intended for improvements to the local National Guard armory.

Margaret Markham urged the committee to be sure that capital outlay requests provide the flexibility to allow for construction for a second story or to add a wing. She noted that recently, a veterans summit was held that was devoted to mental illness among veterans and the

military; a second week was devoted to homelessness. She encouraged the committee to obtain the congressional record of these proceedings.

Melanie Goodman, field representative, U.S. Senator Jeff Bingaman's office, noted that emergency advance payments have been authorized to deal with the backlog on approving the post-9/11 GI bill benefits. Also, telephone outreach has been occurring to inform veterans of their benefits. Senator Bingaman is working on legislation to improve the accessibility and amounts of funding for educational benefits for veterans. The Veterans' Services Department (VSD) and the Higher Education Department (HED) should be actively working together to develop that plan. President Obama's budget calls for rural health services for the VA, telemedicine and other supports for rural clinics.

Captain Walter Baker, U.S.N. (ret.), wondered why the motion regarding GI bills was delayed until the next meeting. Representative Garcia clarified the issue for Captain Baker; the motion was approved.

Kevin Dansila thanked everyone and provided some additional comments regarding the proposed museum. He then noted that the veterans' transition shelter is one of only two veterans' shelters in the state, and he urged the committee to support funding for it. He urged support for a tax provision to increase taxes less than one percent of one cent to be dedicated to veterans' concerns.

The committee left Las Cruces at 3:10 p.m. to tour the White Sands Missile Range (WSMR). Committee members were briefed about the primary testing mission of the WSMR and the multiple uses of the area by the U.S. Army, the U.S. Air Force, the German Air Force and the U.S. Navy. Projects of particular interest include SunZia, which is seeking to extend a power grid across New Mexico. The WSMR is working to ensure that new power lines do not interfere with its testing mission. The WSMR also supports the development of the spaceport, a system of regionalization to ensure collaboration and the cooperation of all the partners that use the area and preparation to receive troops and families who are part of an engineering brigade that will be housed at Fort Bliss in El Paso. The WSMR will not be receiving the heavy combat tank brigade, which would have required housing and support services for an additional 10,000 troops and their families.

Tuesday, November 10

The chair called the meeting to order at 9:10 a.m. at the Sergeant Willie Estrada Civic Center in Alamogordo. Committee members and staff introduced themselves. The chair recognized representatives of Senator Bingaman's office and Representative Teague's office and family members of the namesake of the building. Representative Cote was invited to chair the meeting.

Welcome

Ed Cole, city commissioner, Alamogordo, welcomed the committee to Alamogordo. He acknowledged several members of the community who were involved in the naming of the Civic Center after Sergeant Estrada. Seth Noriega, a cousin, played a brief audio tribute to the life of Sergeant Estrada. A certificate honoring Sergeant Estrada's life and military accomplishments was presented to Pete Estrada, Connie Estrada Coggins and other surviving members of the family by Representative Cote, Representative Vaughn and Senator Duran. The chair read the certificate out loud. Representative Cote was invited to chair the committee.

Interstate Compact for Military Kids

Jim Rickle, regional liaison, military families, Department of Defense (DoD), and Dale Van Detter, DoD, presented information regarding legislation that was introduced and almost passed the state legislature to support military families that are transferred to New Mexico. He described 10 key areas covered in an interstate compact that the DoD feels belongs with the states rather than the federal government. The DoD is developing best practices of states in these 10 areas, which will be transmitted to the National Governors' Association. Mr. Rickle described the history of the interstate compact, which was developed in a partnership between the DoD and the Council of State Governments (CSG). The four major areas stressed in the compact are educational eligibility, enrollment, placement and graduation and focusing on transition issues when military families are transferred from one state to another. So far, 26 states have adopted the compact. He described the process to get the compact adopted in New Mexico, which was introduced in the First Session of the 2009 Legislature, passed the house and all senate committees, but died on the senate floor without coming to a vote. Efforts will be made to reintroduce the bill in the New Mexico Legislature. Representative Cote, who sponsored the bill, announced that he believes this bill will be part of the governor's message for the 2010 session.

The vice president of the Alamogordo Board of Education applauded the efforts of the DoD and the state legislature to get this compact established in New Mexico. Clarification was sought and provided regarding how all school districts would be informed of the elements of the compact.

Representative Vaughn was invited to chair the committee.

4-H's Operation Military Kids

Frank Hodnett, department head, 4-H Youth Development Program, NMSU, described the contents of 4-H program clubs. Critical elements include opportunities for youth to experience belonging, independence, mastery and generosity. Operation Military Kids (OMK) is a new program in his department. It is not limited to Army youth; it welcomes military youth from any branch of the military. He identified numerous partners that participated in the development of the program. The components of OMK are hero packs, speak out for military kids, mobile technology labs and Ready, Set, Go! trainings, each of which was described in detail. The overarching focus is raising awareness and forming networks of support for military youth. The Military 4-H Club Grant program is another program that Mr. Hodnett oversees. It involves an effort to establish 4-H clubs on all military bases in the state.

Committee members asked questions regarding the mobile technology labs and where they are located. The labs will be available statewide.

Holloman Air Force Base: 49th Fighter Wing Mission and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles

Colonel Jeffrey L. Harrigion, wing commander, Holloman Air Force Base (HAFB), provided an overview of the mission of HAFB. "Team Holloman" partner units were identified. The mission of the 49th Fighter Wing is to be combat-ready at all times. Current capabilities were described, which include two air transportable clinics. Pilots and sensor operators are trained at HAFB. Most troops are deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq. Colonel Harrigion described the structure and organization of the base. The historical significance of the base was described. Priorities of the 49th Fighter Wing include readiness, development and care of the air personnel and their families, infrastructure and engagement, each of which was described in detail. He emphasized the interest of the chief of staff of the U.S. Air Force, who is helping to promote the importance of military families and the interstate compact. He stated that HAFB accounts for 60 percent of the population of the Alamogordo area, including military personnel and dependents, civilian employees, retirees and German military personnel and dependents. The economic impact on the area amounts to \$1.1 million per day. Additional programs include a primate research facility, weather balloon operations and collaboration with the German Air Force.

Senator Duran was invited to chair this portion of the committee. She introduced Colonel Hansen Scott. She thanked the Committee of 50 for the reception it hosted the previous evening. Clarification was sought regarding the number of HAFB children enrolled in the local schools and what the anticipated growth will be. A comment was offered about housing at HAFB, which is much improved. Colonel Harrigion noted that HAFB is working with General Scott on identifying the impact of proposed power lines. A request was made to receive copies of communications regarding the concerns and issues arising from the power line proposal. An update on this issue was requested for the next committee meeting. A question was asked about the support and help being provided to families of personnel who are deployed. The Airman Family Readiness Center has an active program of events and services that are targeted to these families. A calendar is published monthly publicizing all of this. Questions were raised regarding efforts that are extended to retirees who remain in the area. A program to meet their needs is still in place and apparently working well. Clarification was sought about how HAFB is compensated by the German Air Force. A question was asked about the readiness of HAFB to incorporate a squadron of F22s into base operations should it be selected to receive them. Colonel Harrigion believes that HAFB has a very good chance of this.

Drew Stout, constituent services representative, read a statement from Congressman Teague. A question was asked about the potential for a field office to be established in Alamogordo.

Representative Cote was asked to chair the committee.

46th Test Group

Colonel Tom Currie, commander, briefed the committee on the mission and vision of the 46th Test Group, which is co-located in the WSMR, Kirtland Air Force Base and HAFB. The group employs 413 personnel and contributes \$90 million per year to the business economy of the area. The missions of the 586th Flight Test Squadron, the 746th Test Squadron, the 781st Test Squadron and the 846th Test Squadron were identified, with the unique contributions of each highlighted. Emerging capabilities of each squadron were identified. The 46th Test Group is responsible for coordinating and scheduling all U.S. Air Force programs conducted at the WSMR. Colonel Currie noted that 45 percent of all the missions at the WSMR are air force missions. High power microwaves and directed laser energy are anticipated to be used in weapons in the coming decade; work is being done on multiple fronts to prepare for this capability. Colonel Currie believes that southern New Mexico is the optimal location to conduct this testing.

Committee members asked for clarification regarding the capability of the cruise missile simulator at the 586th Flight Test Squadron. Clarification was also sought about the purpose of tests involving jamming of global positioning system (GPS) signals. A question was asked about the level of interest from television and film companies. Some commercial work is done, and the media is invited to observe this; Colonel Currie is not aware of any other interest.

Public Comment

Diane Monrey, a veteran, testified about limitations to educational benefits and the realization that these benefits are not lifetime benefits. She has worked hard and went to a vo-tech school that she self-funded, but her life is a struggle. Her employment is unstable, and she recognizes the need for more education. Representative Garcia suggested that the letter the committee approved yesterday address this issue. He moved this; it was seconded and unanimously adopted.

Alan Martinez, deputy secretary, VSD, noted that a constitutional amendment will be on the ballot to extend educational benefits for veterans.

Senator Duran brought the committee members' attention to written public comment that was distributed and noted that Mr. Martinez is already working on it.

Troop Deployment and Medical Screening

Colonel Christine A. Sautter, Medical Commander, Fort Bliss, discussed the medical standards for deployment of soldiers. The comprehensive process takes about three days and involves a checklist for most of the medical services provided. A pre-deployment health assessment questionnaire is utilized, covering medical, dental, psychological and prescription drug information. Appropriate referrals are made as requested. Soldiers are carefully evaluated to determine if a soldier is deployable. Case management services are available. Hearing tests and dental exams are required of all soldiers upon return from deployment. An intensive post-deployment health assessment is performed. A brain injury questionnaire is administered with referral to the brain injury center as needed. A 180-day post-deployment period allows for late disclosure of post-deployment issues.

Committee members asked about the timing of a transition into the VA system; this can occur at any point post-deployment. Clarification was asked about tests for HIV and the ability to detain someone who should not be deployed. A soldier who wants to be deployed can override a recommendation that the soldier not be deployed. A committee member asked whether a soldier is paid during this pre- and post-assessment period. A question was asked about pre- and post-deployment brain injury assessment; a computerized evaluation is now being completed on all active duty military to establish a baseline of information. So far, the post-deployment evaluation is not routinely done, but it is moving in that direction.

Delano Garcia, National Guard, described its system of pre- and post-deployment. A question was asked about the percentage of deployments that go through Fort Bliss; approximately 60,000 troops were processed in the past year at Fort Bliss.

Representative Garcia thanked the presenters, the members and the staff. He reminded members that legislative requests need to be submitted to Mr. Lara no later than November 23 in order to be drafted by the November 30 meeting.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 1:00 p.m.