

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

**July 10, 2015
Room 101/102 Montoya Building
Northern New Mexico College
Española**

The second meeting of the Military and Veterans' Affairs Committee was called to order by Senator Richard C. Martinez, co-chair, on July 10, 2015 at 10:00 a.m. in Room 101/102 of the Montoya Building at Northern New Mexico College (NNMC) in Española.

Present

Sen. Richard C. Martinez, Co-Chair
Rep. Bob Wooley, Co-Chair
Rep. Eliseo Lee Alcon
Sen. Craig W. Brandt
Sen. William F. Burt

Absent

Rep. George Dodge, Jr.
Rep. Dianne Miller Hamilton
Sen. Daniel A. Ivey-Soto

Advisory Members

Rep. David E. Adkins
Sen. Carlos R. Cisneros
Rep. Randal S. Crowder
Sen. Michael Padilla
Sen. John Pinto
Sen. William E. Sharer
Rep. Jim R. Trujillo
Rep. John L. Zimmerman

Rep. Cathrynn N. Brown
Rep. Jim Dines
Rep. Rick Little
Sen. William H. Payne

Guest Legislator

Rep. Debbie A. Rodella

Staff

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

Guests

The guest list is in the meeting file.

Handouts

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

Friday, July 10

Welcome

Nancy "Rusty" Barceló, Ph.D., president, NNMC, welcomed the committee to the campus. She described programs at the college that are designed to directly benefit veterans, such as the Veterans Resource Center, and those that veterans tend to gravitate toward, including a Spanish colonial woodworking program in which 95 percent of enrolled students are veterans. The Española fiesta court also welcomed the committee and invited Senator Martinez to boogie for a bit.

Veterans Resource Center

Mark Rendon, director, NNMC Veterans Resource Center; Ricky Serna, NNMC vice president for institutional advancement; and Charlie Bracken, president, NNMC Student Veterans of America (SVA), gave a presentation on the mission of the college's Veterans Resource Center and its collaborative efforts with SVA. Both the center and the SVA serve more than 80 veterans enrolled at the college, providing services that include advisement, academic support and financial assistance and counseling. The organizations also help veterans access rehabilitation, health care and job placement services. The center currently has a full-time counselor on staff and plans to further expand its counseling and mentoring services. It also assists veterans as they transition from skilled military jobs to civilian work force jobs that require the same or similar skills. Both the center and SVA conduct outreach not only to veterans but also to their families and the community at large, hosting events such as an upcoming Veterans Day ceremony and an October posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) resiliency training workshop, both of which will be open to the public.

On questioning, the presenters and committee members noted that:

- (1) the October PTSD training will be the first of its kind hosted by the center; in addition to providing information, the trainers will gather feedback from area veterans on what services they and their families need but are unable to obtain;
- (2) SVA pressures industries to hire veterans, both directly and through job fairs;
- (3) Los Alamos National Laboratory has historically had an on-campus presence at NNMC, but fewer lab jobs will now be available as the lab shrinks its work force;
- (4) the state and its higher education institutions need to develop a system for certifying veterans in skills they acquired in the military and give veterans college credit for those skills; some law enforcement agencies in the state already acknowledge these skills when hiring veterans; and
- (5) the federal Department of Defense plans U.S. Army troop reductions of up to 60,000 in the next few years, which will suddenly increase the number of veterans in the job market and enrolled in higher education.

Veterans' Services Department Update

Brigadier General Jack R. Fox, secretary, Veterans' Services Department (VSD), and Tom Wagner, manager, VSD State Cemetery Program, gave an update on the department's

efforts to address three of its high-priority issues: female veterans, veterans' transportation and state veterans' cemeteries.

The VSD's "Women Veteran Project" is under way this summer, with three committee meetings already held and a survey soon to be distributed among the state's female veterans to assess their needs and issues. A videoconference with female New Mexico Reserve and National Guard units will take place in September, and a final report on findings will be available in mid-November. Female-specific issues already identified include the need for more female federal Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care providers to work with female veterans; the need for child care assistance as female veterans, many of them single mothers, transition into the civilian work force; and a higher denial rate for PTSD claims submitted by female versus male veterans to the VA, with many of the denied claims arising from military sexual trauma.

In its effort to develop better transportation options for veterans in the state, the VSD is establishing a call center and web site where veterans can get information on transportation resources. The department is working with San Juan College to establish, as part of a VA rural veterans outreach grant, a pilot program for veterans' transportation in northwest New Mexico. Another possible partnership is to work with the National Guard of New Mexico to use volunteers with the State Defense Force Division of the Department of Military Affairs as drivers.

Four new state veterans' cemeteries have been approved by the VA. There will be a groundbreaking ceremony on Veterans Day 2015 for the cemetery at Fort Stanton, with an opening planned for spring 2017; a possible groundbreaking in 2016 and opening in 2018 for the cemetery in Gallup; and groundbreaking for cemeteries in Angel Fire and Carlsbad as soon as VA funding is available.

On questioning, the presenters and committee members noted that:

- (1) of the 2,700 veterans in Rio Arriba County, approximately 270, or 10 percent, are female veterans;
- (2) families of those buried in the current Fort Stanton cemetery will be contacted by the VSD about new VA standards for placing items on graves when the cemetery is converted to a VA-approved veterans' cemetery and its management transitions from the Cultural Affairs Department to the VSD;
- (3) the VSD will be responsible for ongoing maintenance at the state veterans' cemeteries and will request maintenance funding through its annual department budget;
- (4) all of the state veterans' cemeteries will have kiosks tied to the VA's nationwide grave locator database;
- (5) the national cemetery in Santa Fe recently expanded and is not expected to reach capacity until 2040;
- (6) additional locations being considered for state veterans' cemeteries include Hobbs, Roswell, Alamogordo, Taos, Clovis, Farmington and Truth or Consequences;

(7) the state's \$600,000 appropriation for the state veterans' cemetery program is, essentially, a revolving fund: once the appropriation is expended, the VA will reimburse the entire amount, and those funds will then be used to start the next cemetery;

(8) the VSD, as a member of the Interagency Behavioral Health Purchasing Collaborative, is working to address the current shortage of behavioral health services in southern New Mexico, including arranging for pro bono services for veterans in the area;

(9) some of the traditional veterans' service organizations are having a difficult time attracting younger veterans; and

(10) the VSD and veterans' service organizations will host public service announcements regarding the open burn pit registry recently created in statute, and the VSD web site will include a link where veterans who worked near open burn pits during their military service can register.

Public Comment

Floyd Garcia, former member of the National Guard of New Mexico, urged the committee to find a way to compensate and provide care for personnel who suffer from PTSD due to their service during the 1980 riot at the state penitentiary.

Minutes

On a motion duly made, seconded and unanimously adopted, the minutes from the June 17, 2015 meeting were approved.

Veterans' Justice Project

Cathryn Abeyta, program manager, DNA People's Legal Services, and Linda Shannon, veterans' justice outreach coordinator, VA, gave an update on the Veterans' Justice Project and the VA Veteran Services Collaborative, both of which operate in northwest New Mexico to improve veterans' access to VA and other benefits. Under the justice project, veterans get free legal services and assistance in navigating the VA system, with all assistance provided in the veteran's native language. Because transportation is a barrier for many veterans in the Navajo Nation, the project hosts periodic off-site "clinics" in remote areas of its service region. The services collaborative, which focuses on providers, brings together various state and federal agencies that serve veterans, such as the VA and the VSD, as well as community partners and higher education institutions to coordinate resources, referral processes and outreach activities.

On questioning, the presenters, committee members and Mr. Wagner, speaking on invitation of the chair, noted that:

(1) appeals of VA claim denials must be handled by a VA-certified attorney, and there is currently none in northwest New Mexico; the VA web site has a list of all VA-certified attorneys nationwide;

(2) the justice project receives state, federal and private grant funding;

(3) funding restrictions limit the service region for both organizations to San Juan and McKinley counties and certain areas of southern Colorado, though both presenters are willing to train organizations to develop similar programs elsewhere in the state; and

- (4) clinic facilities and attorney services are provided pro bono.

New Mexico Military Issues Update

Speaking on invitation of the chair, Senator Burt reported to the committee that:

- (1) planned U.S. Army troop reductions will affect those stationed in New Mexico and could result in an estimated 17,000 layoffs among civilian employees nationwide;
- (2) Congress has shifted now toward considering a round of base realignments and closures;
- (3) Holloman Air Force Base will soon activate its second F-16 squadron;
- (4) extraction wells are now pulling contaminants from the underground plume near Kirtland Air Force Base; and
- (5) two former commanders of Holloman Air Force Base have been promoted in the U.S. Air Force command structure, and one plans to retire in New Mexico.

Goodwill Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program

Rebekah Pieniadz and Terry Armstrong, Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP) manager and chief services officer, respectively, Goodwill Industries of New Mexico (Goodwill), gave an overview of veteran-specific services provided by Goodwill. In addition to job development skills training, the HVRP provides rapid rehousing for homeless veterans and their families, as well as employment services and case management to help homeless veterans transition into long-term employment. The HVRP TrialWorks program trains veterans on site in retail, recycling, transportation and warehouse work, and participating veterans receive minimum wage during their training period. During 2014, the program's second year, the HVRP served 145 veterans, 104 of whom were placed in stable employment.

On questioning, the presenters clarified that Goodwill's operating revenue comes primarily from sales in its stores and that, contrary to a recent report in which the Goodwill national organization did not score highly on its use of funds, Goodwill Industries of New Mexico (independent from the national organization) spends 92 percent of its revenue on services.

Veteran Upward Bound Program

Randy Larry, director, Veteran Upward Bound (VUB) Program, gave an overview of the services available to veterans through the VUB Program, a college preparation program for low-income veterans and veterans whose parents did not earn a college degree. Though the program is based at the University of New Mexico (UNM)-Taos campus, its service area also includes the UNM-Gallup campus, Luna Community College, New Mexico Highlands University, San Juan College, Diné College, Santa Fe Community College, Navajo Technical University, the Institute of American Indian Arts and NNMC. The program is in its third year of a five-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education, with approximately 120 veterans participating in each of its first two years of operation. Services available to veterans through the program include instruction and tutoring for completion of high school equivalency credentials; refresher courses

in core subject areas; mentoring and general academic support; financial aid counseling; and assistance in accessing services available through local veterans service organizations.

On questioning, Mr. Larry noted that a lack of funds prevents the VUB Program from expanding to Clovis Community College and the New Mexico State University-Alamogordo campus, both of which are interested in participating.

City of Española Veterans Services Issues

Kelly Duran, Española city manager, described to the committee the difficulties faced by the city in raising revenue necessary to provide public services in a region that includes multiple local governments.

Adjournment

The committee adjourned at 3:25 p.m.