

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

**June 16, 2017
State Capitol, Room 307
Santa Fe**

The first meeting of the Military and Veterans' Affairs Committee was called to order by Representative Rodolpho "Rudy" S. Martinez, co-chair, on June 16, 2017 at 10:01 a.m. in Room 307 of the State Capitol in Santa Fe.

Present

Rep. Rodolpho "Rudy" S. Martinez,
Co-Chair
Sen. Bill Tallman, Co-Chair
Rep. David E. Adkins
Rep. Harry Garcia
Rep. Bob Wooley

Absent

Sen. Craig W. Brandt
Sen. William F. Burt
Sen. Michael Padilla

Advisory Members

Rep. Eliseo Lee Alcon
Sen. Carlos R. Cisneros
Rep. George Dodge, Jr.
Sen. Richard C. Martinez
Rep. Jane E. Powdrell-Culbert
Rep. Dennis J. Roch
Rep. Debbie A. Rodella
Rep. Debra M. Sariñana

Rep. Cathrynn N. Brown
Rep. Randal S. Crowder
Rep. Jim Dines
Sen. William H. Payne
Sen. John Pinto
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.

Friday, June 16

Committee members and staff introduced themselves.

2017 Session Legislation

Mr. Fleetwood noted that two pieces of legislation were endorsed by the committee in the last interim, House Bill (HB) 83 and HB 148, both introduced in the 2017 regular session. HB 83, which relates to employment protection for National Guard members, passed and will become effective on July 1, 2017. HB 148 was an appropriation of \$400,000 to the Native American Veterans' Income Tax Settlement Fund to refund state personal income taxes that were improperly withheld. HB 148 died in the Senate Finance Committee.

Legislation transferring the operation of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Colfax County to the Veterans' Services Department (VSD) also passed during the 2017 regular session.

VSD — Overview

Brigadier General Jack R. Fox, secretary, VSD, said that the transfer of the memorial in Angel Fire (Colfax County) was very important, and then he introduced his staff. First to be introduced was Ed Mendez, Rural Veterans Coordination Program (RVCP) director. Mr. Mendez was hired with money from a grant to do outreach to rural veterans, and he found 4,000 veterans in New Mexico who were previously unidentified.

Mr. Mendez said that transportation is one of the biggest challenges that veterans face in the state. The RVCP alerted veterans to the services that are available to them, including six vans that are fitted to transport disabled individuals and are now running about 80 veterans a month to and from the VA Medical Center in Albuquerque. The vans travel all over the state. As the fleet grows, so, too, will the number of routes served by the vans. The RVCP is hoping to expand the program and points to Montana, which currently has 19 vans, as the model.

On questioning, Mr. Mendez said that:

- (1) if called, a van will stop in the Pueblo of Acoma and Pueblo of Laguna and that residents of those pueblos know about this service;
- (2) through the Wounded Warrior Project, a number of tribes have their own vans that are used for this purpose; and
- (3) the vans will go all over the state, as needed, as the whole point is to reach out to rural areas.

Mr. Mendez also distributed business cards that have information so veterans can access these services. He said that education and outreach are critical. Mr. Mendez added, "The best transportation network in the world is useless if people don't know it exists."

Committee members recommended working with the scheduling desk at the hospital and adding to the appointment reminder robocalls that transportation is available, and members asked for a breakdown of routes and usage numbers.

Next introduced was Mitchell Lawrence, healthcare coordination program manager, VSD, to discuss the transfer of the governance of the New Mexico State Veterans' Home in Truth or Consequences from the Department of Health to the VSD. He said that, while the hospital administrator has run the veterans' home well, the transfer of governance allows for a focus and expertise for veterans at the hospital. The veterans' home is creating an Alzheimer's unit, as memory care is becoming more and more critical. With that, the isolation and separation that people in these facilities often face are being taken on directly.

Mr. Lawrence said that an advisory board is being created, which will help with outreach to veterans' services organizations that reconnect veterans to other veterans who share their experiences and to their own past selves and sense of self.

To overcome the staffing challenges that face the New Mexico State Veterans' Home, the VSD is working with the federal Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to bring professional staff to Truth or Consequences, and the state-of-the-art Alzheimer's unit is also attractive to health care professionals.

On questioning, Mr. Lawrence said that:

(1) the federal Veterans Choice Program has been renewed until the allocated budget runs out. However, without a certain date to end the program, it is hard for to veterans to plan accordingly. Also, the Veterans Choice Program insurance coverage requires more information than other providers do, which has caused delays in payment and has in turn made providers less likely to serve veterans in that program. These issues need to be addressed at the federal level;

(2) credit problems that arise from the Veterans Choice Program insurance are dealt with by Mr. Lawrence on a case-by-case basis;

(3) while the state ombudsman does assess where veterans would best be served, more outreach is needed to veterans residing in nursing homes in the state that are not veteran-focused; and

(4) the VSD defers to the Taxation and Revenue Department on REAL ID challenges and the fact that military and veteran identification cards are not being accepted.

Secretary Fox said that the fastest growing sector in the military and in military leadership is women, and he introduced Melanie Suazo, Women Veterans Program coordinator. Ms. Suazo said that New Mexico met its 2016 targets regarding female veterans and that the state is taking

advantage of all available state and federal benefits. Outreach efforts continue with expositions, and resources are being made available to female veterans in all areas of the state.

Ms. Suazo works with all military branches to ensure that, as they separate from service, female veterans sign up for services. One big challenge to get female veterans to attend meetings is a lack of child care, so Ms. Suazo is working with procurement technical assistance centers to provide child care services.

On questioning, Ms. Suazo said that:

(1) treatment is available for sexual trauma that female veterans suffer during their service and that there are similarities to and differences in how sexual trauma is treated versus the treatment for posttraumatic stress disorder; and

(2) there are 17,000 female veterans in New Mexico, and while previously, women only served as nurses and in clerical roles, women are now in all roles in the military.

Secretary Fox said that the VSD and the VA realize that the adage "A vet is a vet is a vet" is just not true, and there is a system failure when addressing female veterans' issues. That said, with women achieving at a higher rate than men, and with women become military leaders, this will start fixing itself, and he is committed to doing that.

Tom Wagner, director, State Cemetery Program, said that the VA approved four state veterans cemeteries: Fort Stanton, Gallup, Carlsbad and Angel Fire. He said that capital outlay money rolls over from one state cemetery to the next, which makes the process more feasible. Mr. Wagner said that the Fort Stanton cemetery will open in August 2017 and that the Gallup cemetery is on the VA's high-priority list.

On questioning, Mr. Wagner said that:

(1) regarding the capacity of the Angel Fire cemetery, 15 acres of land have been donated, and the donor has 40 more acres that he had said he will not develop. Currently, there is no legal commitment to do or not do something with those 40 acres, and Mr. Wagner said that he will try to get that locked down; and

(2) while veterans cannot reserve plots, there is a way for Vietnam veterans to register their intent to be buried at the Angel Fire cemetery.

The committee was invited to attend the transfer ceremony in Angel Fire on July 3, 2017.

Work Plan, Meeting Schedule and Itinerary

Mr. Fleetwood presented the work plan, meeting schedule and itinerary to the committee. Members recommended adding certain items to the work plan, including:

- (1) hearing from the Department of Game and Fish regarding hunting tags and a possible veteran preference in price or access, or both;
- (2) receiving an update from Healing America's Heroes; the group is also holding a fundraiser at the Santa Claran Hotel Casino in Espanola on Saturday, October 17, 2017;
- (3) receiving a report on the transfer of the New Mexico State Veterans' Home; and
- (4) hearing from the U.S. Department of Defense on current proposals and programs.

The committee also swapped the locations for the August 25 and October 17 meeting locations, so the August 25 meeting will be in Thoreau and the October 17 meeting will be in Santa Rosa.

Upon a proper motion, seconded and without opposition, the committee approved the work plan, meeting schedule and itinerary, as amended.

Adjournment

There being no further business before the committee, the meeting adjourned at 4:30 p.m.