

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

**September 2, 2009
New Mexico National Guard Armory
600 Wyoming Blvd., NE, Albuquerque**

The third meeting of the Military and Veterans' Affairs Committee for the 2009 interim was called to order by Senator David Ulibarri, co-chair, on Wednesday, September 2, 2009, at 9:10 a.m. in the New Mexico National Guard Armory at 600 Wyoming Blvd. NE in Albuquerque.

Present

Sen. David Ulibarri, co-chair
Rep. Thomas A. Garcia, co-chair
Rep. Elias Barela
Rep. Nathan P. Cote
Sen. Eric G. Griego
Rep. Rodolpho "Rudy" S. Martinez
Sen. John Pinto

Absent

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

Sen. William H. Payne

Guest Legislators

Rep. Andrew J. Barreras
Sen. Timothy M. Keller

Staff

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

Guests

The guest list is in the meeting file.

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

Wednesday, September 2

Welcome and Introductions

Members of the committee and staff introduced themselves. Senator Keller, in whose district the committee meeting was held, made welcoming remarks. Colonel Brian Baca, New Mexico National Guard, welcomed the committee to the New Mexico National Guard Armory, noting that the room in which the committee was meeting was part of a brand new addition. He showed a brief video highlighting accomplishments of the New Mexico National Guard.

Health Care Access for Veterans

Dr. Meghan B. Gerety, M.D., chief of staff, New Mexico Veterans Affairs Health Care System (NMVAHCS), Veterans Health Administration, Department of Veterans Affairs, offered information regarding the quality and accessibility of health care services for veterans in New Mexico. The NMVAHCS provides a full range of primary and tertiary health care services to veterans throughout the state and is a leader in the provision of rural health care services. The Veterans Administration (VA) Medical Center is part of the NMVAHCS. Dr. Gerety discussed the range of services available through the NMVAHCS and highlighted some of the leading programs and high-tech services that are available. NMVAHCS dental services utilize a diagnostic, computer-aided manufacturing system that reduces the need for extensive travel to receive dental services and provides painless dentistry. A robotic surgery program allows a veteran to leave the hospital sooner following surgery. A cochlear implant program was instituted in April 2008. The NMVAHCS operates a pain clinic utilizing a multidisciplinary approach to the treatment of pain and incorporates cutting-edge pain management techniques. The treatment of mental health disorders has been enhanced in several program areas, recognizing increased needs as a result of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. A women veterans health program acknowledges the unique gender-specific needs of women in the military. Special attention has been given to epilepsy with the establishment of the Southwest VA Epilepsy Centers of Excellence, aimed at delivering care to veterans with both traumatic brain injury and epilepsy. Dr. Gerety testified that the NMVAHCS is very excited about advances in lung cancer research made possible by the addition of Dr. Jenny Mao from the University of California at Los Angeles as the new section chief of pulmonary and critical care. The NMVAHCS is proud of its accomplishments in telehealth and home telehealth, including collaboration with Project ECHO. Outreach, case management and care coordination initiatives ensure that veterans can easily enroll in, and be served by, the NMVAHCS. Dr. Gerety described special programs in Gallup, Rio Rancho and annex facilities. Options are available for veterans to be reimbursed for travel and lodging for those who must travel a great distance to receive care.

Committee members complimented Dr. Gerety and the NMVAHCS for their work and their ability to see veteran patients and fill prescriptions on a timely basis. Clarification was sought regarding the number and location of clinics serving veterans in New Mexico, eligibility

for travel reimbursement and the extent of collaboration with the United States Air Force.

A recommendation was made that the VA medical center consider using the "old" Miners Colfax Medical Center (MCMC) for their clinic in Raton because the current clinic there is very small. An invitation was made for the VA medical center to tour the MCMC for consideration of future uses of the facility.

Opportunities and barriers to collaboration with the University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center were identified. Questions were asked about efforts to ensure an adequate supply of physicians, progress to establish a Fisher House on Kirtland Air Force Base and methods to assure accuracy of data and information in telehealth and home telehealth programs. Dr. Gerety clarified that the expansion was underway to provide capacity beyond that of building a Fisher House. Members asked for additional information about the pain management program, the qualifications of pain management providers and the extent of resources available for mental health and substance abuse services. More detail was requested regarding the supportive housing voucher program; the number of veterans utilizing the vouchers; and the extent of utilization of specialty versus primary health care clinics such as the women veterans health program.

Specifics were asked regarding current and future uses of telehealth, and Dr. Gerety was encouraged to continue to actively pursue greater collaboration with Project ECHO. A request was made for additional information regarding the project to be provided to the committee.

Concern was expressed regarding the length of time it takes to be seen in the emergency department of the VA medical center, particularly to receive mental health services. The committee raised a concern regarding the interface between veterans returning from foreign wars with post-traumatic stress disorder, mental health disorders and increased criminal activity. Clarification was sought regarding the effectiveness of programs of outreach to veterans returning to New Mexico. The committee also expressed concern regarding the time it takes for incoming telephone calls to be answered. Interest was expressed in seeking to increase the number of rural clinics serving veterans and in pursuing contracts with federally qualified health centers. The committee raised concerns regarding the incidence and reasons for the over-prescribing of narcotics to treat pain. Dr. Gerety indicated that while NMVAHCS did provide more pain medication than the national average, it is a common perception that pain medication is underprescribed. Moreover, her office has received congressional complaints for reducing pain medications. It is not known whether the amounts of narcotics being prescribed are appropriate; the NMVAHCS is studying the issue.

A request was made for Dr. Gerety to provide a directory to the committee of key contacts at the NMVAHCS. Kara Catton subsequently provided the following information: the number for the New Mexico VA Health Care System is (505) 265-1711 (local) or toll free at 1-800-465-8262. There are two patient advocates: Betty Vallejos at extension 2686 and Zane Wells at extension 2612. For beneficiary travel inquiries, contact Frank Olivas at extension 4708. For inquiries about the DAV transportation program, contact Lupe Cruz at

(505) 256-2821 (local direct-dial) or extension 2821 after calling the 1-800 number.

Long-Term Care and Brain Injury Services for Veterans

Fred Schaum, liaison to the Veterans' Services Department and the Aging and Long-Term Services Department (ALTSD) brought greetings to the committee from Cindy Padilla, secretary of aging and long-term services. Kimberly Austin-Oser, division director, Elderly and Disability Services Division, ALTSD, introduced members of ALTSD staff who work with brain injury programs and services. The ALTSD has numerous programs for brain-injured individuals; although no programs are specifically targeted to veterans, all programs serving the brain injured are available to veterans. Ms. Austin-Oser described the Traumatic Brain Injury Trust Fund program, which provides short-term, non-Medicaid-funded service coordination, crisis intervention services and life skills coaching. She highlighted the *Mi Via* program, which is a Medicaid waiver allowing brain-injured individuals to self-direct their care and remain at home versus living in an institutional setting. She described the coordination of long-term services (CoLTS) program, the Aging and Disability Resource Center and a video that highlights the effects of brain injury on individuals and families.

Committee members had questions and raised concerns about the possibility of developing veteran-specific services, the length of time it takes for an eligible person to receive services, the problems that arise due to a lack of funding and the inadequacy of sufficient slots to serve current needs. A request was made for a direct contact person to answer further committee questions. Mr. Schaum described the ALTSD social services directory and other significant outreach efforts that are directed to veterans. He volunteered to be the contact person for additional follow-up with committee members.

Commissioning of the USS *New Mexico*

Dick Brown, chair, USS *New Mexico* Commissioning Committee, provided an overview of the process to name a submarine after the State of New Mexico. Captain Mark Prokopius, commanding officer, USS *New Mexico*, thanked the committee for the invitation and expressed his pleasure at being in the state. He described the status of the submarine and crew and the steps necessary to "go active". A formal commissioning ceremony is planned for a future time in Norfolk, Virginia, which will be the only submarine commissioning ceremony the U.S. Navy (USN) will conduct this year. The ceremony will put the spotlight on New Mexico in a substantial way. Mr. Brown asked the committee for its support for this ceremony and all the planned activities.

Committee members expressed gratitude for the great honor bestowed upon the state by this commissioning.

Upon a motion by Senator Ulibarri, seconded by Representative Cote, the committee approved without objection to request approval from the Legislative Council for the committee to participate in the ceremony and receive per diem for attending that event.

Upon a motion by Senator Ulibarri, seconded by Representative Cote, the committee

approved without objection to send a letter to Rear Admiral William Hilarides, USN program executive officer, submarines, requesting that the commissioning of the USS *New Mexico SSN-779* be held prior to the 2010 legislative session.

Upon a motion by Representative Cote, seconded by Representative Garcia, the committee approved without objection to send a letter to Governor Richardson requesting that either he or the lieutenant Governor attend the commissioning of the USS *New Mexico SSN-779*.

Upon a motion by Senator Griego, seconded by Representative Cote, the committee approved without objection to request a certificate of recognition for the USS *New Mexico SSN-779* and have it presented at the commissioning.

Veterans' Home: Long-Term Services for Veterans

Lori Montgomery, administrator, New Mexico State Veterans' Home, offered information about the home, which is the only state veteran's home dedicated to serving honorably discharged veterans, spouses of veterans and Gold Star parents. She provided statistics regarding the number of people being served, the number on a waiting list, the admission criteria, updates on planned expansions, financing needs to complete building expansions and maintenance, staffing needs and budget issues in this currently tight economy.

Questions were asked about the cost to veterans to live at the home, whether any beds are or could be dedicated for residents with Alzheimer's disease, clarification regarding the availability of federal matching funds and whether the home will benefit from any federal stimulus funds.

Veterans Integration Center

Larry J. Campos, state veterans coordinator, Workforce Solutions Department, provided statistics about the number of homeless veterans in the state. Mr. Campos is chair of the board of the New Mexico Veterans Integration Center, which exists to address the needs of these homeless veterans. The center is the only program of its kind in the nation. The program provides employment training, housing and support services to assist homeless veterans to transition into community life. The center currently has a 60 percent success rate. The center collaborates with and makes referrals to a vast network of providers. The center is in the process of moving to a new location, which involves a partnership with Value Place hotel. In the future, the center hopes to expand from its current capacity to a capacity of at least 200 beds. The center is a nonprofit organization that works closely with the Veterans' Services Department. A brief video was shown describing program.

Committee members expressed dismay that prisoners are treated better than veterans in some cases and admitted that they had no idea that conditions were so bad for homeless veterans. Questions were asked about sources of funding, ways in which state support could be made available through capital outlay and ways in which the center could obtain a van with the support of the committee. A request was made for information on the specific needs of the center.

The committee was generally in favor of providing support to the center in any way possible. The committee asked about the process of identifying all of the benefits for which a homeless veteran could qualify and what it would take to gain the trust of veterans who are not willing to access the services to which they are entitled. Questions were asked about the value of partnerships with organizations such as Goodwill Industries and whether individuals making donations to these organizations can designate them for distribution to the center. Many members expressed gratitude for the work of the center.

Lung Cancer Screening Program for Veterans

John Cousins, president and CEO, Biomoda, described a program that operates in partnership with New Mexico State University (NMSU) to screen New Mexican veterans who are at high risk for lung cancer. Richard Cervantes, vice president of research and economic development, NMSU, offered comments about that partnership. Numerous program partners were identified, as was demographic information about the composition of the veterans recruited to be screened. The program has been very successful in identifying early-stage lung cancer in the participants who have been screened.

Committee members asked questions regarding ongoing funding needs, patient privacy and methods for ensuring that veterans who screen positive for lung cancer receive appropriate follow-up care. Clarification was sought regarding the incidence of lung cancer found as a result of this screening program and how New Mexico compares to other states. Interest was expressed in expanding the study.

New Mexico National Guard Missions/New Mission 150th Fighter Wing

Colonel Brian Baca updated the committee about the current extent of deployments and efforts to assist state police in confiscating marijuana plants in Madrid, New Mexico.

Colonel Francis K. Carillo provided a slide show regarding the 150th Fighter Wing of the New Mexico Air National Guard. He began with a historical overview of the service provided by the wing. He described the aircraft in place to support the federal mission and to remain in readiness for deployment. The organization of the wing was described, and future plans for the wing were identified. In order to retain the integrity of the wing, it will divest large numbers of fourth generation fighters while still retaining its wing structure and expeditionary nature. The wing will position itself to host F-352s, which are multi-role fighters. New Mexico is well situated for this type of mission. Other options for the future include becoming a training site for C-130 aircraft or associating with an F-22 unit at Holloman Air Force Base. The Air National Guard is seeking federal legislative support to extend this wing for one more year.

Questions and comments from the committee concerned border patrol missions, the time frame for transitioning to another mission and the need for the legislature to stand behind the wing and its continued presence in New Mexico. General Hanson Scott, director, Office of Military Base Planning and Support, was invited to make comments about this topic. The committee requested an update on the status of the federal legislation that would extend the wing. Antonio Sandoval, constituent liaison to Congressman Martin Heinrich, provided the

update. House and Senate versions are in conference, with all members of the New Mexico delegation in support. Mr. Sandoval noted that both an authorization bill and an appropriation bill will be needed.

Upon a motion by Senator Ulibarri, seconded by Representative Cote, the committee approved, without objection, to send a letter from the committee to key members of Congress requesting the continuation of the mission of the 150th Fighter Wing.

Additional details were requested regarding the current deployments, including where in New Mexico they come from, the number of soldiers lost and the nature of the work they are doing in Afghanistan.

Kirtland Air Force Base Mission and Community Planning

Thomas F. Berardinelli, executive director, 377th Air Base Wing, Kirtland Air Force Base, presented an overview of the numbers of personnel, the mission, the partners and the economic impact of Kirtland on the nation and the state. Kirtland employs over 20,000 people and occupies more than 51,000 acres. The base has an estimated economic impact of \$5.6 billion, 54 percent of which is local. The base's primary mission is to ensure safe, secure and reliable nuclear weapons to support the nation. The 377th Air Base Wing trains and deploys airmen in support of combatant commanders and has more than 100 mission partners conducting space research, supporting Sandia National Laboratories and ensuring defense threat reduction, in addition to completing the wing's many flying missions. Mr. Berardinelli recognized a number of community partners and programs anchored by the Kirtland Partnership Committee.

Kirtland is anticipating significant growth both in military construction and in military personnel, which will result in a substantial economic impact to the state totaling an estimated \$215 million over the next few years. Military construction projects currently underway were identified. Kirtland collaborates with many partners to identify and promote priority projects. Also identified were program subcontracted dollars that benefit small businesses in Albuquerque and the state.

Kirtland is beginning its fifth year in privatized housing on the base, for which the base is recognized nationally. Areas of the base that could be leased to private developers have been identified. Kirtland is aggressively dealing with a fuel leak to avoid further contamination of ground water. A joint land use initiative is underway to help the base and community develop in ways that will benefit both.

Mr. Berardinelli identified several education initiatives that Kirtland is pursuing to prepare local students for advanced degrees in science and mathematics. The base has made significant investments in schools from kindergarten through college, targeting teachers as well as students. Since its inception 14 years ago, this initiative has touched 42,000 students from 326 schools in 76 districts, including charter, private and home schools in New Mexico.

Committee members expressed thanks and appreciation for the work Kirtland is doing,

and the impact it is having. The committee asked questions regarding the organization and structure of the Air Force on the base, educational opportunities for the airmen and the importance of the Science and Technology Center on the base. The committee expressed concern that New Mexico is not actively pursuing uranium mining and nuclear energy. A request was made to provide the committee with the process by which schools participate in the educational component of the base.

Public Comment

Don Arnold, national chief of staff for the United States Volunteers Services, was joined by Alan Martinez, Veterans' Services Department. Mr. Arnold announced that his organization has been asked to host the annual Military and Veterans Appreciation Day, September 24 at the State Fair. He thanked the committee for its interest and passion for veterans and the military. He extended an invitation to the committee to attend the events and activities of the annual Military and Veterans Appreciation Day, from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

Adjournment

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 4:10 p.m.