

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

**July 21, 2016  
Merrion Room  
San Juan College School of Energy  
Farmington**

The second meeting of the Military and Veterans' Affairs Committee was called to order by Representative Bob Wooley, co-chair, on July 21, 2016 at 10:00 a.m. in the San Juan College School of Energy in Farmington. Representative Wooley asked the members and staff to introduce themselves, which they did.

**Present**

Rep. Bob Wooley, Co-Chair  
Rep. Eliseo Lee Alcon  
Sen. Craig W. Brandt  
Sen. William F. Burt  
Rep. Randal S. Crowder

**Absent**

Sen. Richard C. Martinez, Co-Chair  
Rep. George Dodge, Jr.  
Sen. Daniel A. Ivey-Soto

**Advisory Members**

Sen. Michael Padilla  
Rep. John L. Zimmerman

Rep. David E. Adkins  
Rep. Cathrynn N. Brown  
Sen. Carlos R. Cisneros  
Rep. Jim Dines  
Rep. Dianne Miller Hamilton  
Rep. Rick Little  
Sen. William H. Payne  
Sen. John Pinto  
Sen. William E. Sharer  
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 21**

**Welcome**

Dr. Toni Hopper Pendergrass, president, San Juan College, welcomed the committee and described the student body of San Juan College. The average student is 32 years old, and the student body is 61% female and 39% male. Dr. Pendergrass noted that San Juan College is a minority-majority institution and that the college is ranked number two, and hopes to become number one, in terms of colleges that graduate the highest number of Native American students. Dr. Pendergrass also stated that the college has about 1,000 employees.

The rest of Dr. Pendergrass's presentation tracked closely with her PowerPoint presentation (see handout). She focused in particular on the Veteran Center, the Native American Center and the Herencia Latina Center.

Dr. Edward DesPlas, vice president of administrative services, San Juan College, discussed the expansion of the veterinarian technician program and a potential new helicopter flight training program to be offered at the college. He said there are a number of challenges in the helicopter program, including the high cost of flight time and the upkeep of the helicopters. Currently, the college is seeking local faculty and an instructional partner. Dr. DesPlas said that the instructional partner will essentially rent the helicopters for the program and will also be in charge of upkeep of the machines. In fact, he said, the college will not buy or maintain a helicopter or a simulator; the college will just lease the machines and pay for flight time.

A committee member noted that the flight program can, at a maximum, have 85% of its students be veterans, unless the program gets a waiver. Dr. DesPlas said that San Juan College is seeking a waiver. According to Dr. DesPlas, the national and international job markets, more so than the local market, provide ample work opportunities for helicopter pilots. He hopes to leverage students' military training and perhaps expand into a helicopter maintenance program in the future.

Amid some uncertainty about what the GI Bill will and will not reimburse, Alan Martinez, deputy secretary, Veterans' Services Department (VSD), said that under the Post-9/11 GI Bill, flight schools can get reimbursed up to \$177,000, which includes tuition, books and housing.

**Veterans' Services Department Update**

Deputy Secretary Martinez spoke of the department's current and ongoing initiatives. The VSD recently hired Melanie Suazo, Women Veterans Program coordinator, to serve female veterans in the state. Deputy Secretary Martinez said that female veterans often do not sign up with the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) because they do not see themselves as veterans. He said much work is to be done to educate, sign up and serve female veterans.

The VSD is hosting a transportation fair to help veterans and to overcome gaps in service. In particular, crossing state lines for health care is an ongoing issue. To address this, Deputy Secretary Martinez said vehicles have been purchased to get sick veterans to health care facilities. In addition, there are 13 community-based outpatient clinics in New Mexico and 18 service officers around the state. A veteran in crisis can call and talk to another veteran, one of the service officers, to air out his or her problems. These "warm lines" are an additional type of mental health outreach being done by the VSD to address veteran mental health and suicide issues.

Deputy Secretary Martinez said the department took a 13% cut, or \$400,000, to its budget, which translates into a drop in services provided. The cuts also mean that current employees are spread thin. A committee member urged Deputy Secretary Martinez to seek additional funding for the VSD during any special session that occurs this year.

A committee member noted that no legislators in New Mexico are on the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) Standing Committee on Labor and Economic Development, which considers military base realignment and closing.

Upon a motion, seconded and without opposition, the committee requested that a letter be drafted asking that one or more New Mexico legislators be assigned to that NCSL committee.

#### **New Mexico National Guard Update**

Larry Montano, chief financial officer, Department of Military Affairs, and Lieutenant Colonel John Scott, deputy commander of the New Mexico Air National Guard's 150th Maintenance Group, joined Brigadier General Andrew E. Salas, adjutant general, New Mexico National Guard.

General Salas said that the guard's mandate includes guarding against encroachment, as with the SunZia Southwest Transmission Project. To prevent a similar situation from emerging, he said, communication is paramount. The New Mexico National Guard also provides support to first responders, as it did in response to the Dog Head Fire.

The National Guard operates in all 431 zip codes in the state, and all but 23 zip codes house a New Mexico National Guard member. While recruitment is hard, keeping guard members in, and keeping the rest of their families happy, is the most difficult thing.

Regarding equipment, General Salas said that the hand-me-down equipment is making the guard less and less relevant. However, there are areas where New Mexico is leading, such as short-range air defense and directed energy technology. Directed energy translates into jobs in the state, too, as it requires 200 people per battalion.

## **White Sands Missile Range Update**

Brigadier General Timothy R. Coffin, commanding general, White Sands Missile Range (WSMR), and Dan Hicks, G5 director of plans, WSMR, presented on behalf of WSMR. General Coffin said half of WSMR's operating budget comes from appropriations and the other half comes from charging businesses to use its facilities for testing and other uses. He described the Major Range and Test Facility Base, which provides unique opportunities to test new military technologies.

General Coffin said that the secretary of the Army, the secretary of the Air Force and others all come to visit WSMR because of how critical it is to the nation's security. WSMR is massive in size, and the protected airspace is important.

Next, General Coffin went through his handout, "The Third Offset Strategy" (see handout). After World War II, the United States had to prepare all planes to carry a nuclear payload. However, once the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics obtained nuclear capability, the United States military went to the second offset strategy, the precision strike capability.

Now, the United States military is in its third offset strategy, which includes the use of predator drones, swarms of autonomous unmanned aerial vehicles, directed energy and non-line-of-sight communications. The hope is that these technologies will be effective over the next 30 years.

In response to a committee member's inquiry, General Coffin said that WSMR has some amenities that are critical to the quality of life for personnel. For example, the golf course has been criticized because it loses money, but as one of the few green spaces with shade trees, it is used for archery, running trails and other recreational activities. So, while it loses money, it still improves quality of life and provides value in other ways than financial.

## **San Juan College Veteran Center**

David P. Eppich, vice president for student services, San Juan College, went through his handout (see handout). He focused on history of the Veteran Center, the services it provides and its various programs.

While only four years old, the Veteran Center has three staff members and has become a hub for active duty military, veterans and their dependents. Visitors, who numbered almost 2,200 during the 2014-2015 school year, can get assistance in obtaining scholarships, grants, academic and career planning and a host of other help at the center.

Veteran Center programs are a vital aspect of the services provided. The Veterans Upward Bound Program supports veterans in areas where they are weak academically to overcome educational challenges they face. The Rural Veteran Collaborative Program deals with transportation issues and improving outreach to female veterans and trains staff to help veterans in higher education.

### **Navajo Nation Veterans' Issues**

Marie Zwierlein, veteran service officer, Eastern Agency, Navajo Nation Veterans Administration, who is a retired Marine Corps veteran, said Navajo veterans face the same issues as other veterans. She said that outreach requires a lot, there are great distances to travel and often the outreach is best done by a Diné speaker. However, she has noticed that newer veterans are seeking out services.

Ms. Zwierlein covered her handout (see handout) and focused on seven areas: veterans' benefits, housing, health care, facilities improvements, education, recognition of Navajo code talkers and senior centers.

Committee members recommended options for the Navajo Nation Veterans Administration to find both paid and volunteer drivers to transport veterans to service providers. One committee member recommend that Ms. Zwierlein seek a highly rural transportation grant to help veterans in highly rural areas travel to VA or VA-authorized health care facilities.

### **Blue Star Mothers of America, Inc.**

Karen Stevens, past national president, Blue Star Mothers of America, Inc. (BSM), went over the history of BSM. Founded in 1942, BSM is made up of mothers of children who are serving or have served in the United States military. BSM has more than 6,000 members from more than 200 chapters throughout the nation.

Over its history, BSM has spent over \$2.6 million providing care packages and letters to members of the armed forces and hosting veterans' events in this country. BSM also gives generously to the Fisher House Foundation, which provides free or low-cost lodging to veterans and military families of those veterans receiving treatment at military medical centers.

Committee members expressed gratitude for the work being done by BSM and thanked Ms. Stevens for her dedication to veterans. Ms. Stevens said, "Help one veteran's mother, help them all".

### **Adjournment**

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