

NH STATE VETERANS ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

Meeting Date: 5 January 2021
Location: Virtual ZOOM

OFFICERS and VOTING MEMBERS in attendance (✓):

Paul Lloyd - Chair
Diane Domenicis - Vice Chair
Denise DeBlois - Secretary
Joseph DiChiaro, Jr. - Chaplain
Kelly Dobens - Treasurer
David Kenney - Chair Emeritus

Air Force Association

✓ Kevin Grady (prim) Gavin MacAloon

Air Force Sergeants Association

✓ Bob Heichlinger (prim) Ray Hayes (alt)

American Legion

✓ Mike Lopez (prim) ✓ Bill Roy (alt)

AUSA Col. Cross Chapter

✓ Greg d'Arbonne (prim) ✓ Ed Harrington (alt)

Catholic War Veterans

✓ Denise DeBlois (prim) ✓ Robert Guldner (alt)

Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association

✓ Ray Schwendeman (prim) Larry Ward (alt)

Disabled American Veterans

✓ Andrew Patterson (prim) ✓ Robert Guldner (alt)

Korean War Veterans

✓ Mike Lopez (prim) Conrad Perreault (alt)

Marine Corps League

√ Shawn Carboni (prim) Mark Lindsley (alt) √ Chris Pierce (alt)

Military Officers Association (MOAA)

√ Peter Burdett (prim) √ Bob Jaffe (1st alt) √ Joe DiChiaro Jr. (2nd alt)

Military Order of the Purple Heart (MOPH)

Patty Fowler Tony Fowler

National Guard Association of NH

√ Peter Duffy (prim) √ Roy Hunter (alt) Mike Horne (alt)

NH Army Retiree Council

√ Frank Musmanno (prim) √ Mike Rice (alt)

NH National Guard Enlisted Association

√ Mike Lestage (prim) √ Mike Rice (alt) Jack Howley (alt)

NH Veterans Association

√ Kelly Dobens (prim) Mike Young (alt) Doug Crooker(alt)

Reserve Officers Association of NH

√ David Kenney (prim) Mike Horne (alt) BG John Pappas (alt)

Rolling Thunder.

√ Bruce Garry (prim) Keith Hurrell (alt) √ Diane Domenicus (alt)

Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW)

√ Paul Lloyd (prim) √ Darwin Beeman (alt) Russ Norris (alt)

Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA-41)

√ Ray Goulet (prim) Alan Grant (alt) Patti Fowler (alt)

Legislative Members (Voting):

√ Al Baldasaro
√ Regina Birdsell
Bob Guida
Patricia Klee

LEGISLATIVE ADVISORS: (non-voting):

Governor's Office - Jane Graham
Senator Maggie Hassan - Justin Troiano

Senator Jeanne Shaheen - Chris Scott
Congressman Chris Pappas - Patrick Carroll
Congresswoman Annie Kuster - Tom Giancola

COMMITTEE ADVISORS/AGENCIES:

Kevin Forrest, Director, VAMC Manchester, NH
Dr. Brett Rusch, Director, VAMC White River Junction, VT
BG David J. Mikolaities - Adjutant General NHNG
Warren Perry, Deputy Adjutant General- NHNG
Shawn Buck, NH State Veterans Cemetery
Margaret LaBrecque, NH Veterans Home
Amy Cook, DHHS
John Reed, Martin's Point
Barry Conway, Sage Emeritus
Jorge Dreusicke, American Legion

GUESTS: Larry Welkowitz, Brodie Deshaies, Santos Salvi, and Jim Phelan.

OPEN MEETING/CALL TO ORDER: Paul Loyd, Chairman, convened meeting at 1700.

Pledge of Allegiance: Chairman

Invocation: Joseph DiChiaro, Jr.

Joe announced that he is done as Chaplain as of tonight.

Moment of Silence: For all service members who have passed since our last meeting.

Welcome - Remarks of the Chair: Paul welcomed everyone. He reminded he members and guests that we discuss politics but not party politics.

Introduction of New Members/Guests:

Several guests were introduced:

Larry Welkowitz - Representative from Keene, Ward 1, psychologist who worked at several VA's across the country - Honolulu and Manhattan. His father was a World War II veteran. He likes what Paul says that this is about politics not party politics.

Brodie Deshaies - Representative from Wolfeboro, serving on the State Federal Relations and State Veterans Affairs Committees. He is not a veteran. He wants to learn about issues for veterans for his constituents in the state.

Santos Salvi - Owner of Unique System Skills. He has worked with unemployed professionals for the past 40 years. He wants to find out how to help veterans. This is GI Bill approved. There are lots of jobs available in corporations. Spread the word.

Jim Phelan - Guest speaker from Unique System Skills.

Secretary's Report: Meeting had a quorum. Chairman Paul Lloyd mentioned that the Secretary did the minutes from her notes. He messed up the recording and Denise was unable to double check the information. The error is on him. A motion to accept the minutes of December 1, 2020 was made by Al Baldasaro, 2nd by Ray Goulet. Unanimous. Motion carries.

Treasurer's Report: Kelly reported a balance of \$802.67. We are real good at not spending money. She will send the balance sheet to the Chairman.

Comments from Chair Emeritus: None.

Representative Al Baldasaro commented that he invited the new committee members to attend the meeting.

Guest Speakers: Jim Phelan

He is the Business Development Manager from Unique System Skills, LLC. This is an IT Staffing/Training Consulting Company. He appreciates the invitation. Happy New Year to all committee members. He appreciates what the committee does for veterans. Unique System Skills is a company in New Hampshire that helps clients from all over the world to staff up IT personnel. They are trying to reach out to more veterans since this training is GI Bill approved. A lot of veterans can transfer their skills and maybe find a nice job.

Unique System Skills has courses that last for one week to a combination of courses that last a couple hundred hours. Everything is done online. Veterans can use the GI Bill and get a new career started. He (Jim Phelan) used his GI Bill back in the 80's and it worked out well. He helps veterans traverse the GI Bill process. This is part of what Unique System Skills does. They have offices in Nashua, NH (headquarters); Woburn, MA; and India. Telephone: 1-844-887-9239.

Unique System Skills has quite a bit of work for people with the right skill sets. Our goal is to give veterans the right skill sets and be successful in the IT world.

Al Baldasaro asked: What types of IT? Software, hardware, GIS, database?

Answer: many languages, some with security, mostly software, no hardware. Labs in Nashua and Woburn.

Barry Conway asked: How long is the program for? Answer: one week to one year to finish courses. It depends on the course the veteran wants to take.

The Chairman thanked the presenter and asked him to send information.

SUPPORTING AGENCY REPORTS:

Manchester VA Update: Kevin Forrest

Happy New Year to all. There are a couple updates since last meeting. The VA is still doing 50 percent volume face to face visits even with the latest surge. We are open to as much face to face care as we can during these challenging times. There is a lot of tele-health visits and these will continue. Urgent Care is hopping with veterans coming in COVID positive. Our Surgeon General was out for a while. He just came back this week and will get the OR back up.

Appointments for vaccines: This is the biggest effort over the past couple of weeks. Manchester VA is fortunate to have the Moderna vaccine. All VA's have this one. Priority is to get health care staff vaccinated, group 1A, and CLC veterans. About 70 percent of the staff are vaccinated.

VA is prioritizing veterans and running vaccine clinics starting tomorrow. We are starting with outpatient high risk veterans age 85 and up. Older veterans are first on the priority list, then those with high risk factors. More than 50 percent of veterans in New Hampshire are age 65 and older. We are really excited to get this out to the veteran community. VA will contact veterans. The vaccine is voluntary. Thirty (30) veterans per day are being scheduled for vaccine. The Moderna vaccine comes in 2 doses, 28 days apart. The PCP teams are going through the list, prioritizing veterans, and scrubbing patient lists. The call center is busy with veterans calling. The willingness to get the vaccine increases. The supply chain should be good. VISN 1 is getting the supplies. The VA is going through a big consent process. The bottom line is that the VA is looking forward to starting the clinics tomorrow.

The VA has a website for veterans to declare they want the vaccine. It is in the chat box.

<https://www.va.gov/health-care/covid-19-vaccine/stay-informed>

This helps with the the priority list and outreach. Get the website out to the veteran community.

Scam Warning: Kevin warned that there are scams out there. The Public Affairs Office brought this up. Veterans are being scammed for money so they can be placed on a higher priority list. The VA will never ask for money to put you on a priority list. Notify the VA if you get a scam call, text or email. Scammers are posing as insurance companies. There are scam ads on social media. The FBI is warning that the scams are

asking for medical details and your social security number. Do not provide this information.

Appointments: There is a rigorous screening process for veterans coming into the VA for appointments. Only veterans can come in. The VA is not able to accommodate someone accompanying a veteran to an appointment. Caregivers can go into the VA in extreme cases.

NHVVH Team: The VA deployed teams to support the New Hampshire Veterans Home and now they are back.

Facilities update: The new Urgent Care and Mental Health building is tracked for an activation period in March to install computers, furniture, etc. It is ahead of schedule. We are excited to do a ribbon cutting ceremony with an opening late summer. They are working through the Mountain Entrance. There are contractor issues now. We may have a completion date by the end of the month.

The completion date of the Women's Health Clinic will be determined after the construction award.

The Loop Project - this is a major utility upgrade. A road is being installed around the facility. Thirty (30) percent of the plan is complete. We are looking at a completion date later in the year.

There were a lots of questions.

Al Baldasaro asked: What have you been seeing with the Moderna vaccine given to staff? Any sickness? Any issues? Answer: There were some staff reactions. Everyone has to sit for for 15 minutes under observation. Some had a sore arm for a few days. VA has given about 700 shots. Screeners go through a history. Vaccine recipients are asked what immunizations you have reacted to. VA is endorsing people to get the vaccine as part of the bigger picture.

Dr. Rusch added that there is a range of reactions. Most are in the nuisance category - sore arm, mild fever. A slight fever shows that you are getting an immune response. This is not viewed as a problem. Allergic reactions are rare and the most concerning. It has happened. Under medical observation, allergic reactions are manageable with the right resources on hand, such as epi pens. The right people are on hand to manage it so that it is not life-threatening. It takes some time to observe people. There are some concerns out there. If managed appropriately, people are safe as a result. Weigh the risks that you face today contracting COVID. The benefits outweigh the risks.

Al Baldasaro asked: Is the VA going to protect the privacy of the veterans by not turning over names to state registry? Dr. Rusch responded that in the state of Vermont, the VA does not and will not do that.

Bruce Garry asked: Do you have an update on the dental clinic? Answer: Not yet on any opening. This is due to lack of air exchanges.

Rep. Brodie Deshaies asked: Do we know the long term effects of the RNA vaccine? What is the medical community doing to respond to that? Dr. Rusch responded that it is under investigation. There is no scientific theory on long term concerns. It is being studied. We are confident of the safety within the next 4-8 months. This is the first vaccine of its kind. Technology is very promising. Time will tell if the RNA vaccines will cause weak or strong responses.

Mike Lopez asked: How is the VA coordinating with the Governor's guidelines? Are veterans 85 years and older relying on the VA or local specialist doctor (outside VA) to give the vaccine? The Governor is saying 75 and over. This needs to be cleared up on where to go. Answer: The VA would like veterans to rely on the VA. Another question: Who is going to screen the lower echelon and risk factors? Answer: The PAC Team is going through the priority list and reaching out to veterans to coordinate a time to come in. The team is looking at the risk factors. Mike commented that information given to an outside heart doctor is not always given to the VA doctor. This affects the determination of who is at high risk. Kevin added that screeners will ask about other care outside of the VA.

Barry Conway commented that Governor Sununu is not making the vaccine mandatory. Kevin said the vaccine is voluntary. Jane Graham added that the Governor will not make it mandatory in NH. The state is keeping track of who is getting the vaccine and the type to make sure you get the same type for the second dose. The state needs a database. The federal government requires it to get allocations of the vaccine.

Peter Burdett asked: Does the VA get its own allocation? Does the flu shot give any help for the COVID vaccine? Dr. Rusch responded that you do not want to get the flu shot and COVID vaccine at the same time. That would be exceptionally bad. You need both. The rates of flu are lower this year because folks are wearing masks. This is encouraging.

Peter Duffy asked: Where do veterans go to get the vaccine? Answer: See the website link.

Kevin Grady asked: Have you gained this all out? How long will it take all veterans to get vaccinated? Answer: We are hoping to do a couple hundred per week. The VA services about 28,000 veterans in New Hampshire. We need to hire additional vaccinators in order to vaccinate as quickly and safely as we can. Veterans need to wait 15 minutes after the vaccine.

Kelly Dobens commented: Medicare lists can be purchased. Veterans and the elderly are easy prey. Kevin Forrest said that VA has developed promotional material to safeguard from scams. Contact the local VA if something is not right.

White River Junction VA Update: Dr. Brett Rusch

It will take time to get through all the categories. The VA will get veterans done more quickly compared to other areas at first. About 2 percent of Vermonters have been vaccinated. It is more important now to wear masks, wash hands, and social distance than to worry about the ordering and administration of the vaccine. Keep doing what we are doing. We can save more lives that way. It is getting hot right now. The hospitals are getting full right now in Southern New Hampshire. White River Junction is fantastic, safe, and beds are available. We are ready to take care of you. You will be in good hands. A group of World War II veterans were vaccinated in Vermont last week. This is a group of men and women who were willing to take the lead on this. See the Valley News for the article.

This week we are focusing on homeless veterans at Boulder Point in Plymouth, NH. This is a high risk group of people. This facility is on a beautiful 11 acre parcel. Boulder Point has a partnership with Harbor Care of Nashua. They will be onsite tomorrow to vaccinate veterans. They are doing the same in Vermont later. This is a good moment for the state. The VA is identifying groups of veterans that need taking care of now. See tomorrow's news for the Boulder Point story.

The vast majority of staff have been vaccinated. VA is putting a lot of energy in getting fully open. It is a long road to recovery and getting the VA back up to speed.

Al Baldasaro thanked the VA Directors for what they are telling us. This is important information for all of our veterans.

DMAVS Update: Amy Cook

The Department is participating in the Governor's Commission on Homelessness, Housing Stability, Affordable Housing, and Housing Instability. Provide input to Warren Perry in an email.

NHSVC: Reminder from Shawn Buck that January 9th at 10:30 AM is wreath pickup. Wear masks, warm clothes, and durable gloves.

NH Office of Veteran Services: No report from Bill Gaudreau. VSO's continue to be available by appointment.

Business Recognition Event: A virtual recognition event was held for 19 businesses. Eighty (80) business professionals and guests attended. Some businesses will be highlighted on the website. Some of the businesses are on an advisory committee volunteering their time. The next business recognition applications are due on July 1st.

Ask the Question Revitalizing Campaign: Ask-Link-Collaborate; link clients to services.

There is a 12 month pilot on the technical assistance program.

Community Outreach is starting in the next 30 days.

NH on Suicide Prevention Council: In January, we start engaging in strategic planning.

NHVV Update: Peggy LeBrecque

All residents are now COVID free. It has been a long 8 weeks. Words of the staff, it felt like war and in the trenches. Fifty-five (55) residents recovered. Two (2) staff members are out with COVID. Ninety-five (95) staff recovered. The NH National Guard came in to do testing - all negative results. We are hoping to close the outbreak and move forward. PPE is in good shape. We always have a different kind of PPE.

Vaccinations: Huge shout out to Governor Sununu for placing the NHVV at the front of the list. The Governor reached out with a closed POD (Point of Distribution) - staff giving vaccines to the residents themselves. Vaccines to staff were staggered in the event of reactions not to impact work shifts. There were no reactions other than sore arms, headache, and fatigue or cloudy head. No staff called in sick due to the vaccine. This was a huge plus.

The NHVV's 2020 survey is being done virtually. They are waiting to see how that goes. Most surveys were put off. They are moving to the challenge of a virtual platform. Those doing the surveys will want to sit down with residents and family members.

Shout out to Kevin Forrest at the VA and Warren Perry for the loaning of staff. The National Guard helped with running the vaccination clinics. This was huge. It felt like a well-oiled machine.

Last shout out: The NHVV is looking for 18 LNA's and 2 RN's. The previous shout out for help resulted in maintenance and dietary positions being filled. Two (2) LNA's started and a nurse practitioner. We are still doing the best we can to take care of veterans. People are still applying to get in.

Greg D'Arbonne commented: It is amazing that in about 7 weeks, the NHVV went from crisis to zero COVID. This is a testament to how New Hampshire handles veterans and how everyone comes together - the VA, National Guard, and the State - a great team effort. This is a story that needs to go out there. Peggy said "NH does it better than anyone else." She added that I did not have to reach out. People were calling and asking how they can help.

OLD BUSINESS:

None.

NEW BUSINESS:

Chairman Paul Lloyd has a few things. We need a new Chaplain.

Paul was contacted by a business in Concord that had a clothing drive and has 5 tons of clothes to donate for veterans. The Liberty House cannot take it. Send an email if you have any thoughts.

Bob Heichlinger encouraged members to talk to your Congressional's about getting a commissary back at Pease. One benefit that is missed the most is the commissary. There is a small one at the shipyard. It is too small with narrow aisles and limited parking. The shipyard would love to have that space back for parking. There used to be one at Pease. He is anxious for support from organizations. Let your Congressional's know that you want to get a full commissary back at Pease. One quarter of a million families are eligible since the benefit has been extended. It serves a larger group and the entire community. Bob added that this is possible if we back it.

LEGISLATIVE BRIEFINGS: Kevin Grady - Legislative Chair

He went thought the list and all LSR's are in. He asked Regina Birdsell to confirm. She added that all are in for the Senate and are not written out yet.

They just started posting the one they got so far. Twenty-five (25)percent of the language is uploaded. We have all the house bills for this year. The first 2 house bills are straight forward. We can get these on record.

The first one is HB #53: Use of force in National Guard facilities. It is now HB #117. It has the language. The bills will be sent all together.

Another house bill will align the language with the National language. This is the same bill as last year. It was tacked onto another house bill and was vetoed by the Governor.

Kevin Grady made a motion to support HB #117. This was seconded by Ray Goulet. Unanimous. Motion carried.

The second bill is HB #353: Gold Star Family Decals for Motor Vehicles - trying to waive the \$10 fee. It has no language yet. It is confirmed correct and is not a carryover.

Kevin Grady made a motion for we as SVAC to support HB #353. This was seconded by Ray Goulet. Unanimous. Motion carried.

We have 40 percent of the bills we will get for the next meeting.

LEGISLATIVE ADVISORS:**Jane Graham (Governor's Office):**

The Governor's time was spent working with Peggy and Paul at the NHVH. We are so excited to have no active cases among residents. A lot of people came together. The National Guard helped staff with fit testing. Peggy and team and everyone put in a lot of hard work.

2021 started without COVID at the NHVH.

The new legislation the Governor is working on is the budget and vaccine planning that includes priority categories. Tomorrow the State website will have a list of co-morbid conditions (2 or more co-morbidities) for group 1b. Some state sites are set up to vaccinate health care professionals and first responders. Additional vaccine sites are being set up.

The National Guard is helping around the state and at the NHVH. We appreciate what they are doing.

Jane said to feel free to reach out.

Bruce Duffy asked: Are they (the National Guard) at the police barracks on Route 16 to vaccinate? They moved out after testing and now they are back. Answer: We will get a list of all locations from DHHS. There are 7 additional sites. There will be more details for the public.

Chris Scott (Senator Shaheen):

The Senator appreciates all the work and updates from Peggy and staff at the NHVH and all elected officials. Our hearts go out to Peggy and staff.

Additional nursing staff was sent from the VA to the NHVH. A letter was sent asking for an extension to get more nursing staff for a few weeks.

Items in DC of interest: NDAA approved a 1.4 trillion dollar funding package; authorization for a 160 million dollar dry dock for 2 Virginia class submarines; scheduling flexibility for firefighters at the shipyard; 3 percent pay raise for service members.

Stand Alone Legislation: Benefits for Agent Orange Veterans: 4 more diseases associated with Agent Orange exposure.

Support for military spouse licensing and transferability of licensing is included. This alleviates burden on small businesses.

Federal assistance for Beyond Yellow Ribbon Program. This helps secure 22 million for services to troops returning from deployment. It includes mental health services.

Military Records Request: 50 million in funding to assist the backlog in records request due to COVID-19.

Other: 503.6 million additional funding for VA intervention and treatment programs; expand acupuncture in VA facilities - one of the top 3 services; fully eliminate the backlog in Community Care claims - largest complaint from veterans; add language to establish and maintain the registry for veterans occupational exposures; 666 million for Veteran Women's Healthcare.

Justin Troiano (Senator Hassan):

He echoed everyone's comments for Peggy and staff for their incredible work and the loss at the NHVH. This is a true testament of the NH community coming together.

December 11th: US Senate passed bipartisan legislation for NH veterans: Deborah Sampson Act - create a dedicated Office of Women's Health at the VA - eliminates barriers to care and enhances privacy; Reducing High Risk to Veterans and Veteran Services Act - creates a high risk list; K2 Veterans Advocacy Act of 2020 - for veterans exposed to toxic substances in Uzbekistan; Veterans Economic Recovery Act - creates a veterans technical program; Health Act - train and help women veterans transition to civilian life and cover certain transportation expenses for newborn children of women veterans; VA Directly Returning Opioid Prescription or DROP Act - creates drop off centers to help veterans safely dispose of unwanted medication.

January 1st: NDAA passed 3 percent pay raise for all US military personnel; 160 million for Portsmouth Naval Shipyard dry dock project; bipartisan bill to better protect service members abroad due to threat from small drones; increase funding for PFAS study at Pease; bill for Military Personal Protective Gear to better fit female veterans; provisions to remove Confederate names, symbols, displays, monuments, and paraphernalia from Defense Department bases and other assets; provisions to address rising threat from China; and provisions to establish cybersecurity support.

January 4th: Bipartisan bill to Improve Veterans Affairs Caregivers Program signed into law - extending benefits after veterans are deemed ineligible for the program.

Tom Giancola (Rep. Annie Kuster): Unable to attend.

Patrick Carroll (Rep. Chris Pappas):

The cemetery bill did not make it in. It will be brought back up. Follow up on the VA Omnibus Bill sent to the President - hopefully he signs it.

Rep. Pappas' thoughts are with the family's of residents at the NHVH; families are happy with the communication.

Sponsored Bill: HR 8860 Strengthening VA Whistleblower Protection Act of 2020.

Sponsored Letters: To Secretary Wilkie during him to extend the moratorium on veteran's debt collection as the COVID-19 pandemic continues into 2021; To the Inspector General during him to investigate serious serious concerns and allegations regarding potential interference with the investigations of the Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection (OAWP).

Committee Meetings: Full committee hearing on "A Time for Change: Assessing the Need to Modernize Veteran Eligibility for Care."; Economic Opportunity Subcommittee Hearing on Priorities for the 117th Congress; and Women Veterans Task Force on the 2020 Report of the VA Advisory Committee on Women Veterans.

Rep. Pappas is looking forward to another two year term.

Good of the Order:

None.

Calendar of Events:

1st Wednesday- Monthly POW/MIA Vigil - 1900 at Veterans Park, Manchester, NH.

4th Tuesday - Monthly POW/MIA Vigil - 1900 at Langdon Park, Portsmouth, NH.

Every Thursday - Weekly POW/MIA Vigil - 1900 at Hesky Park, Meredith, NH.

Next meeting date: 02 February 2021

Adjourn Meeting: 1830

Respectfully Submitted,

Denise M DeBlois
Secretary

