

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON THE READJUSTMENT OF VETERANS

November 05-06, 2024
811 Vermont Avenue, Conference RM 3166
Washington, D.C.
(In-Person & Virtual: Microsoft Teams)
8:00AM – 5:00PM (EST)

MINUTES

Tuesday, November 05, 2024:

Attendees:

Committee Members Present:

Heather Nystrom
Viviana Marcotte
Khamkay Chitaphong
Cheryl Jacobs
Isaac Pike
Grover Wind
Mark Fleming
Patricia Ross

Department of Veterans Affairs Staff Present:

Joshua Mathis, Designated Federal Officer
Matthew Newman, Assistant Designated Federal Officer
Michael Fisher, Chief Officer, Readjustment Counseling Service
Karen Cordie, Vet Center Director, Sioux Falls Vet Center
Holley Brock, Vet Center Director, Columbus Vet Center
Melinda Johnson, Vet Center Director, Central Oregon Vet Center
Scott Winters, Vet Center Director, DuBois Vet Center
Chris Poe, Vet Center Director, Casper Vet Center
Jeff Moragne, Director, Advisory Committee Management Office

Public Attendees:

James Dugan, Veteran Program Manager, Canine Companions

Opening Remarks:

At 8:00 a.m., Designated Federal Officer Joshua Mathis welcomed the Committee

members and initiated housekeeping items for the building and Conference Room Space (811 Vermont, Conference RM 3166). He then invited members of the public to introduce themselves for the record. Only one member of the public was present, James Dugan, who introduced himself.

Committee Chair Heather Nystrom called the meeting to order, took a roll call to establish a quorum, and provided an overview of the meeting, including a review of the day's agenda.

Presentation:

At 9:00 a.m., DFO Mathis and Chair Heather Nystrom led the Committee in reviewing the Committee Objectives and Charter. They also provided an overview of the Committee Report process moving forward, recapped the administrative meeting held on July 11, 2024, and finally reviewed the VA response to the 24th Committee Report.

Chair Heather Nystrom led member introductions, including introductions of three of the five new members of the committee. These introductions included background information, experience, biographical information, and personal interest discussions.

Presentation:

At 9:30 a.m., DFO Mathis and ADFO Matthew Newman provided a brief presentation and overview to set the stage for the planning and prioritization block of the meeting on Wednesday, November 6th.

The committee adjourned at 9:45 a.m. for a fifteen-minute break.

The committee reconvened at 10:00 a.m. after the fifteen-minute break.

Committee Discussion:

At 10:00 a.m., Committee Chair Heather Nystrom led the committee in a discussion on the 24th report and the future planning and prioritization session. Members discussed the previous report's recommendations and VA responses. They also briefly talked about meeting topics, speakers, and locations to prepare for the planning and prioritization exercise.

Presentation:

At 10:30 a.m., the Chief Officer of Readjustment Counseling Service (RCS), Michael Fisher, welcomed the Committee and made remarks. Mr. Fisher then updated the committee on the status of the recommendations from the 24th report that were specific to RCS; these included updates to vacancy rates, staff pay grades, and timely hiring.

He discussed numerous topics that the committee requested, including pipelines for recruitment, RCS procedures surrounding client suicide attempts, access to care, expansion of services, and updating RCS's electronic health record.

Mr. Fisher shared additional information regarding Vet Center outreach efforts, including the use of the new Vet Center Outreach Application, which was designed to help modernize the data collection and documentation of RCS's outreach efforts. Community partnerships, including partnerships with universities and colleges, and RCS's delivery of services for special populations, including transitioning service members and National Guard/Reserve members, were also discussed.

The Chief Officer then opened the discussion to questions; the committee did not ask any questions at that time.

The committee then adjourned at noon for lunch. The committee re-convened at 1:30 p.m. after lunch.

Committee Discussion:

At 1:30 p.m., Committee Chair Heather Nystrom led the committee in a discussion of RCS Chief Officer Michael Fisher's previous presentation. Discussion included key takeaways from the presentation and how the presented topics could help develop topics and areas of consideration for the 25th report.

The committee adjourned at 2:15 p.m. for a fifteen-minute break.

The committee reconvened at 2:30 p.m. after the fifteen-minute break.

Presentation:

At 2:30 p.m., the Committee received a presentation on rural Vet Centers. This presentation consisted of five Vet Center Directors sharing information about their Vet Centers, which primarily consist of large rural areas. Karen Cordie from the Sioux Falls, South Dakota Vet Center, Holley Brock from the Columbus, Georgia Vet Center, Melinda Johnson from the Central Oregon Vet Center, Scott Winters from the DuBois, Pennsylvania Vet Center, and Chris Poe from the Casper, Wyoming Vet Center all provided the committee with overviews of their Vet Centers, the area they service, visit data, and they shared challenges, and promising practices uniquely related to providing services to predominantly rural communities.

Focus Group Discussion:

At 4:00 p.m., the five Vet Center Directors who previously presented on rural Vet Centers participated in a focus group discussion with the Committee. This discussion allowed committee members to receive additional details surrounding the challenges and best practices associated with providing services to individuals in rural

communities. Outreach efforts, the use of community access points, and virtual services were also discussed.

Committee Discussion:

At 4:30 p.m., Committee Chair Heather Nystrom led the committee in a discussion of the rural Vet Center presentations and the Vet Center Director focus group. Discussion included key takeaways from the presentations and group discussion with Vet Center Directors, and conversation on how the information could be best utilized to the development of the 25th report.

Adjournment:

At 5:00 p.m., Committee Chair Heather Nystrom and DFO Josh Mathis recapped the day's presentations and provided an overview of the material planned for the next day.

The committee adjourned for the day at 5:00 p.m.

Tuesday, November 05, 2024:

Attendees:

Committee Members Present:

Heather Nystrom
Viviana Marcotte
Khamkay Chitaphong
Cheryl Jacobs
Isaac Pike
Grover Wind
Mark Fleming
Patricia Ross
Abigail Deluca

Department of Veterans Affairs Staff Present:

Joshua Mathis, Designated Federal Officer
Matthew Newman, Assistant Designated Federal Officer
Michael Fisher, Chief Officer, Readjustment Counseling Service
Christina Zais, Veterans Benefits Administration
Kristina Messenger, Veterans Benefits Administration
Stacy Valenti, Veterans Benefits Administration
Regina Yount, Veterans Benefits Administration
Jeff Moragne, Director, Advisory Committee Management Office

Opening Remarks:

At 8:00 a.m., Designated Federal Officer Joshua Mathis welcomed the Committee members back for the second and final day of the meeting and provided an overview of the day's agenda. Committee Chair Heather Nystrom did a roll call to ensure there was a quorum and provided a brief recap of the previous day's material.

Presentation:

At 8:10 a.m., Christina Zais, Assistant Director for the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Office of Outreach, Transition, and Economic Development (OTED), presented to the Committee on the Women's Health Transition Training program. The presentation included an overview and a more detailed description of the different modules involved and future developments of additional modules. One new module Ms. Zais discussed was aimed at Reserve and National Guard members.

The committee asked about the current offerings to Reserve and National Guard members.

Presentation:

At 8:40 a.m., Kristina Messenger, Deputy Executive Officer, Operations, Compensation Services, presented on the Warrior Training Advancement Course (WARTAC). The presentation included an overview of WARTAC, as well as more detailed information about the process, including data on graduation and retention rates and training timelines.

The committee asked one additional clarifying question about the requirement to begin employment within 60 days of graduation.

Presentation:

At 9:10 a.m., Stacy Valenti, Assistant Director, Office of Outreach, Transition, and Economic Development, presented to the Committee on the Veteran and Spouse Transitional Assistance Grant Program. The presentation included an overview of the program, as well as detailed information about eligibility, services provided and the industries and skills served.

The committee did not have any questions at that time.

Presentation:

At 9:40 a.m., Regina Yount, Assistant Director, Office of Outreach, Transition, and Economic Development, presented to the Committee on the VA Solid Start Program. The presentation included an overview of the program and detailed information about the proactive outreach included in the program. The presentation also included the

program's goals of suicide prevention, successes to date, and the impact of Solid Start; Ms. Yount shared relevant data and demographics associated with Solid Start and potential future enhancements to the program.

The committee did not have any questions at this time.

The committee adjourned at 10:10 a.m. for a twenty-minute break.

The committee reconvened at 10:30 a.m. after a twenty-minute break.

Committee Discussion:

At 10:30 a.m., the Committee Chair, Heather Nystrom, led the committee in a discussion of the VA Transition Programs that were presented earlier in the morning. Discussion focused on key takeaways from the presentations, including eligibility and accessibility for Reserve and National Guard members. Conversation included how the presented information could be used to develop the 25th report, and how it can be used to determine future presenters for the February meeting.

The committee adjourned for lunch at 11:30 a.m.

The committee reconvened after lunch at 1:00 p.m.

Committee Discussion:

At 1:00 p.m., DFO Joshua Mathis, ADFO Matthew Newman, and Chair Heather Nystrom led the Committee in an exercise aimed at planning and prioritizing topics for the 25th report. This exercise consisted of an individual brainstorming session for members, followed by the committee reviewing and discussing the individual ideas as a group. Overarching themes were discussed and categorized to produce an affinity diagram with sticky notes. Numerous topics were shared, including reviewing tools and procedures surrounding high-risk clients, services to rural communities, transition assistance program, and increasing the use of technology to communicate and engage individuals.

The committee adjourned at 2:30 p.m. for a fifteen-minute break.

The committee reconvened at 2:45 a.m. after a fifteen-minute break.

After reconvening, the Committee concurred on the topics and their categorization. The Committee discussed the ideas and the priorities in more detail and engaged in a multi-voting system to determine the top three areas for the Committee to focus on moving forward. The three topics receiving the most votes were services and outreach to National Guard and Reserve members, understanding the scope and objectives of other advisory committees to prevent duplication of efforts, and collaboration and training within Veterans Benefits Administration.

After determining the top three priorities, the Committee discussed potential future presenters, topics, VA programs to meet with, and reading material to help with developing the 25th report. ACOMO Director Jeff Moragne briefly spoke to the Committee. He shared the importance of the Committee's report and provided insight and guidance into how to best draft recommendations in the future. He suggested using the SMART Goal format and discussed the importance of attainable and actionable recommendations.

Public Comment:

At 4:00 p.m., the floor was opened to public comment. There were no members of the public present. However, James Dugan, who had attended the prior day's meeting, requested his written comment be read to the committee. DFO Joshua Mathis read his written comment regarding his organization, "Canine Companions," aloud to the Committee.

Wrap-up:

At 4:15 p.m., RCS Chief Officer Michael Fisher gave a brief closing statement, thanking the Committee for their work.

DFO Joshua Mathis and Committee Chair Heather Nystrom discussed the dates of future meetings and possible locations for the on-site portions of the visit. The Committee recapped the day's briefings and summarized the planning and prioritization exercise.

Committee Chair Heather Nystrom adjourned the meeting at 4:45 p.m.

/s/ Nystrom Heather
Committee Chair
Date: February 3, 2025

/s/ Joshua A. Mathis
Designated Federal Officer