

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)
Veterans' Advisory Committee on Rehabilitation (VACOR)

COMMITTEE MINUTES

May 13, 2025

Virtual Meeting
Washington, D.C.

ATTENDEES

Committee Members Present (9 of 13):

- Mr. Robert Hines (Chair)
- Ms. Tiffany Drain
- Dr. James McRavion
- Dr. Michelle Peterson
- Dr. Terri Pagoda
- Ms. Jacqueline Breitenstein
- Dr. John Milam
- Mr. Luis Echeverria Newberry
- Dr. Franco Santos

Ex-Officio Members:

- Mr. Michael Heaney
- Dr. Kristi Hill
- Ms. Jessica Davis (absent)
- Dr. Lisa Ottomanelli (absent)
- Mr. Nick Pamperin (absent)

Department of Veterans Affairs Staff Present:

- Ms. Latrese Thompson, Designated Federal Officer (DFO)
- Ms. Kristina Olson, Alternate DFO
- Mr. David Smith, Alternate DFO
- Ms. Veronica Brown, Supervisor of Field Services with Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) Service
- Dr. LaTonya Small, Program Specialist with the Advisory Committee Management Office (ACMO)

Public attendees: Ms. Sidath Panangala with Congressional Research Service

Welcome:

Ms. Kristina Olson, Alternate DFO called the Committee meeting to order at 11:00 a.m. (EST) and introduced Mr. Robert Hines, Chair. Mr. Hines proceeded with the Rules of Engagement, a roll call of members, and a review of the agenda. Ms. Olson reminded the Special Government Employees (SGE) to submit their Annual Recertification and Ethics Training for SGE certificates. The Regular Government Employees (RGE) were asked to provide confirmation of their completed annual ethics training. The Committee viewed Mr. Douglas A. Collins' Secretary of Veterans Affairs (SECVA) Advisory Committee Message <https://youtu.be/3EyLJVHvBEU>.

VACOR Briefings:

Dr. LaTonya Small, Program Specialist with the ACMO provided a Federal Advisory Committee Act overview and updates.

Ms. Gina Klaus, Independent Living Coordinator with VR&E Service provided an overview of VR&E Independent Living services and the VR&E 2102B Grant for housing adaptations.

Mr. Jason Latona, Assistant Director and Mr. Alexander Dickinson, Program Analyst with Loan Guaranty provided an overview of the Specially Adapted Housing (SAH) program. Mr. Dickinson discussed current grant amounts, the grant process, and examples of projects completed.

Mr. Billy Wright, Employment Coordinator with VR&E Service provided an overview of the Non-Paid Work Experience (NPWE) program, a training program that provides practical work experience. Mr. Wright also explained marketing, employer and participant benefits, and steps to set up a NPWE. Mr. Wright discussed with VACOR that there has been a decline in NPWE usage since COVID.

Public Comments: None

Committee Discussion:

The status of VACOR Recommendations for FY 2025 were also discussed and that the recommendations are pending for SECVA approval.

- **Recommendation #1:** All local VR&E office voicemail messages to add (a) the following language and (b) the automated option, "If you are having a medical or mental health emergency, hang up and dial 911. If you are having thoughts of suicide, press 7 now to be connected with the Veterans Crisis Line or hang up and dial 988 and then press 1."
- **Recommendation #2:** Update all VBA contact information on the websites listed on <https://www.benefits.va.gov/benefits/offices.asp> to include correct address, phone number and hours of operation, as well as ensure all internal links go to the intended target webpage.

The Committee posed a question to be assessed during their next meeting “How do less medically complex VA facilities handle more medically complex Veterans with rehabilitation needs?”

Pre-decisional meetings:

FY 2025: Field visit (virtual) during the week of August 11, 2025, to the VA Southeast Louisiana Health Care System and VA New Orleans Regional Office.

FY 2026: Field visit (in-person) in April 2026 to San Juan, Puerto Rico to assess Veteran access to care in a geographically isolated location.

The Committee adjourned at 3:29 p.m. EST.

Submitted:

/s/ Mr. Robert Hines

VACOR Chair

Date: June 2, 2025

/s/ Latrese Thompson

Designated Federal Officer

Date: June 2, 2025