

IOWA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
Iowa Commission of Veterans Affairs Quarterly Meeting
Wednesday, April 6, 2022 10:00 a.m.
Iowa Veterans Home, Whitehill
Marshalltown, Iowa 50158

Commission of Veterans Affairs Members

All Present: Elizabeth Ledvina, Chair
Darlene McMartin, 1st Vice Chair
Gary Wattnem, 2nd Vice Chair
Orene Cressler, Member
Steven Hyde, Member
Kenneth Lloyd, Member
George Mosby, Member
Gregory Paulline, Member
Mary Van Horn, Member
Carol Whitmore, Member

Iowa Veterans Home/Iowa Department of Veterans Affairs Staff Members

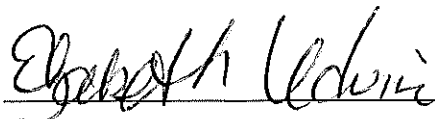
Present: Matthew Peterson, Commandant, Iowa Veterans Home
Laurel Degelau, Volunteer Coordinator, Iowa Veterans Home
Polly Roll, Executive Secretary, Iowa Veterans Home, Recording Secretary
Steven Lukan, Executive Director, Iowa Department of Veterans Affairs
Karl Lettow, Public Information Officer, Iowa Department of Veterans Affairs

Guests Present: Ryan Dickson, Des Moines Veteran Affairs Regional Office


Michael Mortenson, President – Iowa Association of County Commissioners & Veteran Service Officers
Michael Braman, Veterans of Foreign War State Commander
Jim Peterson, The American Legion
Rich Lennon, Webster County Veterans Affairs Commission
Judith Mekota-Johnson, Director, VA Medical Center, Iowa City
Roger Elliott, Vietnam Veterans of America, Chapter 490
Pat Sweeney, Director, Polk County Veterans Affairs
Fred Schuster, Senator Grassley's Office
Harrison Swift, Senator Grassley's Office
Matt Rutker, Senator Grassley's Office
Penny Vacell, Senator Grassley's Office
Sara Ackert, Veterans Affairs Central Iowa
Dan Kuester, Veterans Affairs Central Iowa
Rodney Fuller, Veterans Affairs Central Iowa
William de Blois, Officer of the Governor
Robert Waugh, The American Legion State Commander
Kristi Catrenich, Des Moines Regional Office
Wayne Marek, Des Moines Veterans Center

NOTE: THESE MINUTES ARE UNAPPROVED UNTIL ACCEPTED BY THE COMMISSION AT THE NEXT MEETING.

APPROVED: _____



Date: _____



Call to Order

Chairperson Ledvina called the meeting to order at 10:00 a.m.

Pledge of Allegiance/Moment of Silence

Pledge of Allegiance was led by Chairperson Ledvina followed by a moment of silence for our departed veterans, POWs, those missing in action (MIAs) and those on active duty at this time.

Roll Call

Polly Roll took roll call. Guests introduced themselves.

VA Regional Office Update

Ryan Dickson, Director's MA, from the Des Moines Regional Office, filled in for Director Bruce Voigt. Bruce sent his apologies as he is attending a Directors conference in Washington, D.C. Ryan spoke on the following.

- Ryan works with System Access for County Veteran Service Officers to get access to their system. He is also on the National Security team to protect records and maintain record security. He has been on that team for one year.
- Getting access to a better system is a huge tool to be able to see the veteran's records and claims. This will serve the veteran better.
- An account will be inactive after 60 days. Try to keep active so you don't have to start the process all over. Trying to streamline the process. This was taking 6 months to get a veteran through from start to finish, now down to 45 days.
- Problem - In the state of Iowa, less than one percent of all veterans that have an organization fall under the national county veterans service organization. If that is the only organization that the person works for, those are the only veterans that they will be able to serve.
- Push to get System Access and for cross accreditation across organizations. This will help serve veterans more efficiently.

VA Medical Center - Iowa City Update

Director Judy Mekota- Johnson spoke on issues listed below:

- Workforce – It has been difficult to recruit and maintain a workforce. Trying to maintain staff such as flex scheduling.
- Air Commission Report

A study in 2018 found the need for the below:

- A Community Living Center
 - 22 beds for veterans
 - Keep veterans closer to home
 - Building CLC – Partner with communities, hospitals, etc.
- A Resident Rehabilitation Treatment Program
 - 28 beds
 - Keep veterans closer to home
- Complimentary Strategy
 - We are experiencing a mental health pandemic
 - Increase of substance use
 - Increase of family counseling
 - Recruit and retain providers
 - Work with training programs and increase our capacity
 - Build telehealth capacity
 - Open mental health beds next year – Started construction on a 10-bed facility. This is a needed program for our veterans.

- Substance Use program – expanding program
- Covid Booster – CDC has allowed a second Covid Booster
 - Starting to administer the booster this week.
- Nursing homes are having problems getting meds and supplies for veterans through the VA. This will be looked into.
- Clinic in Coralville is moving to a location on Highway 6.

VA Medical Center – Des Moines Update

Sara Ackert, Associate Director and Interim Director, gave the update for the Des Moines VA Medical Center. There has been a director nomination made and signed off on. There is no official announcement yet; however, the new director is to start May 8th. Central Office will soon make the announcement.

- Airs Commission Report, 1 recommendation and 8 complimentary strategies
 - Recommendation – establish a presence in the Ames, Story County, area. There is a concentration of veterans in that area.
 - Approved for a mobile clinic. Will have in Ames area in the near future. Testing the market first before a permanent clinic is established.
 - Complimentary Strategies
 - Expand Substance use disorder treatment, currently recruiting providers for the Carroll and Marshalltown area.
 - Expand in-home care services. Currently have services in Des Moines, Knoxville and Mason City. Expanding services to Marshalltown and recruitment is underway.
 - Create a multi-specialty CBOC in Fort Dodge. Primary care services are separate from mental health services so it is technically not a multi-specialty CBOC. There is a location for the new clinic. An opening date will be announced soon.
 - Establish a clinic in Des Moines separate from main campus – close to being completed. Location by Southridge mall – old Toys R Us building.
 - Two specialty surgery strategies – Want to keep in-house. This would be best for the veterans.
 - Two Mental Health Strategies
 - Create partnership with community.
 - Build rehab program. Will see how the Iowa City rehab center does.
- Issues with staffing
 - Do to staffing issues, had to reduce bed capacity.
 - Increased LPN scales and have recruitment and retention incentives.
 - The VA can be competitive but not a pay leader.

Iowa Department of Veteran Affairs Update

Steve Lukan, Veterans Affairs Executive Director, gave an update.

- Helped facilitate Veterans day on the Hill at the State Capitol. Good turnout and good engagement with lawmakers.
- Veterans Officer Spring School is coming up. VA helped fund this.
- It has been busy at the veteran's cemetery. Below are a couple of big projects that will be done at the cemetery.
 - Roadway will be resurfaced.
 - Upgrade water system for the grounds.
- Upgraded computer system.
- Challenges in hiring
 - Hired license clerk specialist – Kevin House. Former clerk specialist Bob Betts retired.
 - They have been able to fill vacant maintenance positions in spite of few applications.
- A piece of legislation did pass on the way to the Governor to allow the State Treasure to be more aggressive in finding interest for the Iowa Veterans Trust Fund. Investing has been conservative. The legislation is going to allow the State Treasure to find ways to increase the interest that comes into the

Veterans Trust Fund. Money comes from the Iowa Lottery for the Iowa Trust Fund. They have been able to spend \$500,000 each year that comes from the Trust Fund for applications plus spendable interest. In the future, consider inviting the State Treasurer to come and give a presentation.

- It was asked if there could be some type of heat provided for outside in the glassed-in areas for funerals. Steve said that would be considered.
- Steve introduced Will de Blois, the Governor's liaison. He works with policies and with Veterans Affairs. The Governor has doing some initiatives toward the efforts in Ukraine. Steve invited Will to come and share.

Governor's Office Update – Will de Blois

Will extending a thank you for inviting him to share with the Commission about what Iowa is doing to help Ukraine as they fight to maintain their freedom and sovereignty.

On March 30, 2022, Governor Reynolds launched Iowa's effort to aid the people of Ukraine. The State will be providing 146 protective helmets and 714 ballistic vests to Ukraine through donations from the Department of Public Safety and 18 other law enforcement agencies. The retired equipment is past the manufacturers' recommended service life but still in usable condition.

Iowa has a special connection to Ukraine through our sister state relationship with Cherkasy. Today's donation fulfills an urgent need in Cherkasy and represents an incredible team effort from the entire state. Cherkasy, similar to Iowa, has an economy largely driven by agriculture, and its capital city is the center for industry, primarily manufacturing, furniture making and agricultural processing.

Governor Reynolds also announced that the state, along with Iowa Sister States, will work with Meals from the Heartland in West Des Moines to help address the immediate and ongoing food supply needs of Cherkasy. Planning is underway to send an initial shipment of meals as soon as possible, and then assess how longer-term needs may be met.

In addition to these actions, Governor Reynolds has also:

- Removed Russian-produced alcoholic liquor products from Iowa's wholesale purchase list.
- Ended Iowa's sister state relationship with Stavropol Krai, Russia.
- And proclaimed March 6th a Day of Prayer for Ukraine.

Iowans from across the state have expressed their solidarity with the brave people of Ukraine as they courageously defend their country and fight for their freedom. Our donation of helmets and vests is one small way we can show that Iowa stands with them.

Keep the Ukrainian people in your prayers.

Iowa Veterans Home Update

Commandant Matt Peterson welcomed every one. It is a pleasure to host everyone that care about veterans and have common goals. One of the common goals is to turn the corner on Covid.

- Covid Stats
 - Announcement ending of the proclamation on February 15. This created a bookend for us. Started in March 2020 and ended February 15, 2022.
 - Looking at what we did well and what we could do better. We have been through pandemics before and want a record of what we can do differently in any future pandemics.
 - Average Iowa nursing homes house 46 residents. From March 2020 – February 2022, the average number of residents at the Iowa Veterans Home was 445. Nearly 10 times the average size.

- During the pandemic, 85 of our residents tested positive for Covid. That is an infection rate of 19.1 percent. During that same period time, the infection rate across the state of Iowa, was 24 percent. The significant efforts of IVH staff was incredible. They have been studious every day for nearly two years. They made sure every resident received the best level of care. Our residents, as defined, are some of the most vulnerable in the state of Iowa. Thanks to the staff, the infection rate was lower than the state of Iowa.
 - Twelve IVH residents have died while Covid positive. This doesn't mean that they died because of Covid. Four of them did not contract Covid at IVH.
 - Average stay for residents is 5.83 years. We become like their family. Losses are felt personally by both staff and residents.
 - Accomplishments due to PPE, testing, screening and high vaccination rates. Administered more than 76,000 tests.
 - 96 percent of residents are vaccinated with 88 percent that received the booster.
 - 84 percent of staff vaccinated compared to 61 percent vaccination rate in the state with a 66 percent vaccination rate in Marshall County. We still believe it is the best way to prevent Covid.
 - 49 IVH staff from March 2020 – February 2022, did not miss work due to any Covid related issues.
 - Pandemic is now over. It is currently classified as an epidemic. IVH is continuing to be vigilant in protecting the residents as we start to balance the quality of life. Cautious but optimistic
 - Atha dining hall is now open for breakfast and lunch for vaccinated residents, M – F. We plan to open it in increments for every meal and for every resident every day of the week.
 - Canteen will be open in May.
 - Library, gift shop and gym in every facility are open.
 - Bingo has started back up again.
 - Just had a St. Patrick's Day dance in Atha. That went well!
- American Legion Post
 - An American Legion post will soon be established at the Iowa Veterans Home (IVH).
 - 3rd District Commander and the State Commander have been instrumental in helping get this started.
 - Both staff and residents are interested in being members. There are enough signed up to get the post established. Some residents are Legionnaires but are unable to attend their post meetings. This will be a way for them to get involved again.
 - This is a way to further the veterans' community at IVH.
- Staffing
 - Recruiting and retention continues to be a struggle but IVH is making progress.
 - Compensation is more than just salary. IVH does pay well.
 - Creative with retention and sign-on bonuses.
 - Current level of staffing is at 84 percent.
 - Offering creative ideas with weekend three 12- hour shifts employment packages with the use of the cottages.
 - Developing program to provide child care.
 - Looking to build a child care facility for 300 children. This will be located west of Ulery and will be built from the combination of state funds and funds that IVH raises. This will be operated by an existing child care provider.
 - Will be open to the public to enroll their children also.
 - For every four children in Marshall county, there is one child care opening. We, statewide, are in a child care crisis in which the Governor has recognized and acknowledged.

- 100 slots will be reserved for IVH staff.
 - Discounted or free to IVH staff, pending on details worked out with the child care provider.
- Opportunities
 - In any crisis, there are opportunities if you have the right perspective. During Covid, we lost many residents through admissions as the residents were not coming to IVH. Staff members were lost due to attrition.
 - Consolidated residents and vacated Fox residential unit for better ratio care. Then used Fox for an isolation unit for residents with Covid.
 - Now that Covid has turned a corner, IVH will be moving residents from Heinz Hall, last original residential building, to Fox. Fox is modern and more comfortable. Heinz Hall is very beautiful and historic; however, there is a lot of work that would need to be done to bring up to code. If you have any ideas for use of Heinz Hall, please let Matt know.
 - Some residents are concerned about the move as Heinz Hall has been home to them for a long time. One resident has been there since 1980. IVH is addressing all resident concerns during this transition.
- Commission
 - Matt is not asking anything from the Commission at this time but would like to be involved in meetings like this.
- Traveling and Meetings
 - Matt met with former Commandant Jack Dack's wife. Jack is now deceased. Twilla had many specific suggestions for Matt. Jack did a lot of traveling all over the state and country to advance the agenda of veterans and also for the veteran's community. Matt would like to meet with any and all veteran organizations.
 - IVH has resources others don't have and other organizations has resources IVH doesn't have.
- In closing, IVH is resilient and optimistic and continue to rely on relationships with community organizations. Thankful for those organizations. Private sector, individual citizen and organizations that have given of their personal time, finances, etc. Matt and IVH is very thankful for that. Matt is especially thankful for the veteran-based organizations of whom are represented at this meeting today.

Comments/Questions for Commandant Peterson

- A question was asked if there has been any conversation of additional veteran's homes for the state of Iowa. Matt answered with a "yes". He had been present at the Iowa House of Veterans Affairs committee meeting where a proposal was presented to create a veteran's home in Glenwood. If there are Iowans underserved and are going to other states to be served and to receive benefits, that is a problem. There are a lot of logistics and regulatory concerns to be considered. The proposal has not been fully developed yet and is still being looked in to.
- A question was asked if residents are getting out once again and if volunteers are welcome. Matt responded that residents are now going on busses to different local destinations and volunteers are welcome. Matt deferred any questions regarding volunteers to Laurel Degelau, Volunteer Services Coordinator.
- The American Legion Department Commander Bob Waugh spoke on The American Legion National Commander Paul Dillard's visit to Iowa and specifically to the Iowa Veterans Home (IVH). National Commander Paul Dillard was extremely impressed with the Iowa Veterans Home, both staff and residents. Staff and residents knew each other which speaks volumes. He noticed how clean and well-kept IVH is. He said IVH is one of the best, if not the best veterans' homes, he has visited. Commandant Peterson responded how honored he was to have the National Commander at the IVH

facility. He also welcomed representatives from other veteran organizations to tour IVH. The American Auxiliary National President Kathy Daudistel will soon be visiting.

- Chairperson Ledvina encouraged people to get on the Iowa Veterans Home Facebook page. There is a lot happening at IVH. She also extended a congratulations to staff longevity, especially the 40-year staff.
- Commandant Peterson mentioned that the IVH website will be “overhauled”. One of the changes will be a virtual tour added.
- Chairperson Ledvina asked if there were limitations on volunteer hours. Laurel Degelau answered that there were no limitations.

Approval of Minutes

2nd Vice Chair Commissioner Wattnem made a motion to approve Commission Quarterly meeting minutes of January 5, 2022. Seconded by Commissioner Van Horn. Motion carried. Approved unanimously.

Commissioner Lloyd made a motion to approve Trust Fund conference call meeting minutes of January 6, 2022. Seconded by Commissioner Wattnem. Motion carried. Approved unanimously.

Commissioner Van Horn made a motion to approve Trust Fund conference call meeting minutes of February 3, 2022. Seconded by Commissioner Cressler. Motion carried. Approved unanimously.

1st Vice Chair Commissioner McMartin made a motion to approve Trust Fund conference call meeting minutes of March 3, 2022. Seconded by Commissioner Whitmore. Motion carried. Approved unanimously.

Old Business

Commissioner Cressler brought up a concern. A veteran application was approved on January 31. Not filed as of March 1. It was brought up to the board again. It was approved unanimously but noted there will be no more exceptions. A new letter will be mailed to the client stating they meet the guidelines. It is always good to error on the side of the veteran.

Veteran of Foreign Wars

Veteran of Foreign Wars (VFW) Iowa Commander Mike Brannan was introduced by Chairperson Ledvina. Mike gave a few personal details including that he now lives in Knoxville. He and his wife have seven kids and are foster parents. They just adopted a 2-year boy with special needs. He has grandchildren and two sons-in-law. He is a high school and little league coach. For three years he was a peer support specialist in Des Moines.

Mike felt like he could serve veterans in a better way through the VFW. He is very proud to announce that the VFW was able to increase community service by 11 percent through this past year with a total of 44,000 VFW volunteer community hours. They have given over \$195,000 to go back into the communities with a total impact of over \$1,000,000 in the state of Iowa. Over \$14,000 have been given in youth scholarships. Hannah Noels from Garner, Iowa, is in the running for the Voice Democracy \$30,000 award for high school students. This will be on Facebook. VFW wants to spread the word and market what the VFW does.

If a service member falls into a financial hardship during deployment, they can file for an Unmet Needs Program for National. 51 cases, \$73,000, have been awarded to Iowa veterans.

Sport Clips Award scholarship, E4 and below service members can apply for this scholarship. There have been 31 applicants from Iowa and over \$128,000 has been awarded.

Mike has been a member of the VFW for five years. In Mike’s opinion, the National Accredited Service Officers are the most important people to veterans. They are assisting Iowa veterans and getting them funding on disability claims, death benefits, education benefits and many other benefits. All these funds that Iowa veterans get, go back into the Iowa economy. If you are a national accredited service office and are at the

federal building, you should be able to apply for grants/stipends on a yearly basis. To fund two VFW staff, office expense and parking, it costs \$87,000/year to fund the office. They have to fundraise to pay employees. This is why you see organizations struggling. Need to get younger members to join veteran organizations. Mike has a proposal in which he spoke with to Chairperson Ledvina. She, then asked Mike to speak at this meeting.

Chairperson Ledvina was told that the license plate fund needed a purpose. This would help with regional offices. Could be cross accredited – rely on partnership with VSOs. Make access easier, not harder. Iowa Code is so vague. It was proposed to give each organization \$10,000.

New Business

Chairperson Ledvina gave an update on legislation.

- House File 2501, Veterans Trust Fund, passed, 95-0 House, and 47-0 Senate, waiting on Governor's approval. Interest is 1.40%.
- House File 2427, Certification for Special Registration Plates, passed and granted.
- House File 2293, Senate File 181, Increasing interest from \$500,000 to \$800,000. Passed House 97-0, Still waiting on Senate. Taking from fund already there.
- US Iowa Commission Fund, voted party line 13 – 6, Amended using compromised language of \$75,000 – General Fund. It is still "live" and being debated.
- On April 4, House Appropriations Committee passed FY23 budget. Department of Veterans Affairs received \$1.2 million, Home Ownership program - \$2 million, Counties - \$990,000 for county grants, Iowa Veterans Home - 7.1 million, total veterans' budget- \$11.35 million
- As of April 1st, the Home Ownership is out of funds.

Community Comments

Roger Elliott with Vietnam Veterans of America announced that there will be a Living History Event – Gold Star Museum, Wednesday July 6th.

The Wall That Heals, a three-quarter scale replica of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial along with a mobile Education Center, is coming to Tama from August 4th – 7th at the Meskwaki Settlement School. It will be open 24 hours a day and free to the public. The Wall That Heals honors the more than three million Americans who served in the U.S. Armed forces in the Vietnam War and it bears the names of the 58,281 men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice in Vietnam. It will also be coming to the Iowa Veterans Home.

Next Commission Meeting

The next meeting will be Wednesday, July 6, 2022, at the Gold Star Museum in Camp Dodge.

Adjournment

Commissioner Wattnem motioned to adjourn, seconded by Commissioner Lloyd. The meeting adjourned at 12:20 p.m.