

**VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMISSION
MINUTES
SEPTEMBER 9, 2003
NYS MILITARY MUSEUM AND
VETERANS RESEARCH CENTER
SARATOGA SPRINGS, NY**

ATTENDEES:

George Basher DVA
Harvey McCagg DVA
Charles Phillips DMNA
Mary Quay (Recorder)DVA

Commission Members:

Honorable Roy McDonald
Ben Peets
Karl Kristoff
Jim Haggerty
Dorsey Whitehead
Anthony Bonarti

OPENING REMARKS

Director of the New York State Division of Veterans' Affairs, George Basher opened the meeting with introductions around the table.

Acknowledgement was made by Director Basher to welcome the newest member of the Commission, Assemblyman Roy McDonald. Assemblyman McDonald has taken on the role and responsibility that former Assemblyman Charles Nesbitt held for many years. McDonald has been a veterans' advocate and will be an asset to the Commission.

AGENDA ITEMS

NYS DIVISION OF VETERANS' AFFAIRS UPDATES:

Development Team

Director Basher discussed the procedure and reviewed the Development Team progress. He stated that the Development Team has been up and running for eight months and processed over 500 cases. The processing time for a veteran's claim going through the Development Team appears to be processed 40 percent quicker than the normal VA processing timeframe. According to the Division's current data, the Development Team wins 70 percent of the cases they review and submit to the VA. It was also noted that customer satisfaction is continuously high.

Representatives from Washington DC came last week to observe the Development Team's process and preparation of claims.

Claims Processing and Procedure

Director Basher noted that the Division is in the process of trying to track claims that the county veterans service officers submit. Other veterans organizations, such as the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, etc, also submit claims for veterans. The Division is trying to tally the number of claims submitted throughout New York State and also the award amounts that New York State veterans receives. Director Basher stated that this is an "all in one" system trying to assist New York's veterans in receiving the benefits they deserve.

Division Employee and Office Review

Director Basher stated that four years ago, when he became Director of the Division, there were 115 employees within the Division. To date, there are 98 employees representing the NYS Division of Veterans' Affairs throughout New York State.

Over the past four years the Division has placed counselors and support staff in all 12 of the VA Medical Centers. Director Basher stated that there are veterans at the VA Medical Centers and the Division needs to be where the veterans are.

Veterans Administration Cares Commission Plan

Harvey McCagg distributed a "Fact Sheet" regarding Cares Commission Plan. The Veterans Affairs Commission members agreed that this information was very informative and should be shared with others.

Director Basher informed the commission members there would be a hearing in Syracuse on September 19th regarding the Cares Plan to close selective VA Medical Centers. Canandaigua and Manhattan VA Medical Centers were earmarked medical centers in New York State. Director Basher stated the Cares Plan is a nationwide plan and the VA Secretary Principi will have to accept or reject the entire plan in February or March of next year.

Other Veterans' Issues and Concerns

- Director Basher stated that the Syracuse VA Medical Center is slated to expand with a spinal cord unit.
- Assemblyman Roy McDoanld asked, "What are the top ten problems within the Division of Veterans Affairs?" It was noted that New York State has the fourth largest veterans' population in the country. Over the years, approximately 40,000 veterans are departing NYS either by death or moving to another state. It is estimated that 6,000 new veterans are entering NYS a year. McDonald suggested more outreach to New York State's veteran population is a need. The real challenge is to hook veterans to benefits. McDonald suggested that the Division train volunteers to assist in processing claims for veterans.
- State veterans nursing home in Syracuse. Director Basher stated that the Department of Health has said there is no bed need for a nursing home in Syracuse. Basher said that a "Needs Survey" was in the works last week by the Department of Health, but he has not heard the outcome.
- Director Basher informed commission members of meetings the Division has been developing with the Veterans Service Agencies (VSA) across the state. Basher stated that the meetings were to inform and train VSA officers.

DIVISION OF MILITARY AND NAVAL AFFAIRS UPDATES (DMNA)

Charles Phillips from DMNA offered a location at the Division of Military and Naval Affairs for the next Commission meeting. According to Phillips, there is plenty of space and free parking.

Mr. Phillips continued by informing the Commission of the extended timeframe for the tour of duty for our service men and women in Iraq. The announcement went out today to the ones overseas.

Future deployment is up approximately 1,000 soldiers. Recruiting is down from the National level and current enlisted men and women are not reenlisting. Mr. Phillips stated that if you enlist today you would probably be deployed.

Mr. Phillips noted that with the anniversary date of 9/11 just two days away, there has not been any added reinforcement required.

Mr. Phillips stated that the Patriot Plan is on the books. This Plan includes a burial benefit to soldiers' family if he/she is killed in action. It is not certain who will be running this program and where the funds will come from. There are more details to be worked out.

Transition of soldiers back into the civilian life has been running smoothly according to Mr. Phillips.

Phillips also noted that the Veterans Oral History Program has interviewed 500 participants. It is an outstanding program recorded by the ones who lived through it.

TOPICS FOR NEXT MEETING'S AGENDA

- Review ways to recruit volunteers to become certified service officers to assist in filing veterans' claims.
- Solicit the Veterans Affairs Commission members for recommendations for consideration for appointment to the Board of Visitors for New York State Veterans Homes. This governing body of members assists in policies, approved admissions, recommendation from organizations and they work closely with the nursing home facility.

NEXT VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMISSION MEETING

December 9, 2003

Location: Division of Military and Naval Affairs, Latham, NY

Meeting adjourned at 2:20 with a tour of the Museum to follow.

Other Pertinent Information Enclosed with Minutes

- Process for appointment of Board of Visitors Committee
- Predicted Vacancies within Board of Visitors Committee
- Listing of Nursing Homes in New York State