

**VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMISSION  
MINUTES  
DVA CENTRAL OFFICE – ALBANY  
MARCH 30, 2000**

General John H. Fenimore from the Division of Military and Naval Affairs (DMNA) opened the Veterans Affairs Commission meeting by asking the attendees to introduce themselves.

Attendees:

General John (Jack) H. Fenimore V, Adjutant General, DMNA  
George Basher, Director NYS Division of Veterans' Affairs  
Harvey McCagg, NYS Division of Veterans' Affairs Executive Director  
William O'Malley, Republican Chairman Niskayuna, Korean Veteran  
James Haggerty, Department of Labor, Korean Veteran  
Ben Peets, Retired from Army 45-year term  
Dorsey Whitehead, Military Retiree, Vietnam Veteran  
Herman Harrington, WWII Veteran, Past State American Legion Commander  
Honorable Ron Tocci, NYS Assembly, Chairman NYS Veteran Affairs Committee

General Fenimore noted the last commission meeting took place nine years ago. This meeting will be the kick-off session.

Historically, the Division was formed right after World War II to help meet the influx of veterans coming back from the war. The Veterans Affairs Commission was created by the Governor to assist the Director of the NYS Division of Veterans' Affairs with areas of concern in respect to the veterans' population in New York State. The Commission has representatives from the Division of Veterans' Affairs, Division of Military and Naval Affairs, the Senate and the Assembly. The mission of the Commission is for the members to advise the Director of the DVA; what needs to be accomplished and what the Division needs to be working on.

The floor was given to George Basher, Director of the New York State Division of Veterans' Affairs (DVA). Director Basher thanked everyone for attending this very important meeting. He brought up the issue of the dwindling level of veteran influence in the legislature and in government in general. It is a major concern that the Division needs assistance from people who are veteran oriented, but not necessarily alienated with any particular veterans' organization or group. In the selection process for the commission the Division has selected members that reflect the average veteran citizen. The Division is trying to reach out to the 1.4 million veterans in New York State and determine what concerns and issues the Division needs to take care of on their behalf.

Director Basher then thanked General Fenimore for all that he has done and also thank him for taking on the role of Chairman for this Commission.

Next, Director Basher reviewed the contents of the packets of information distributed to the attendees. Included in the package was; the DVA Digest of Laws, listing of DVA personnel, and a summary of enacted veterans' legislation 1995-1999. The handouts gave background and current information regarding the agency. The Division is one of the smallest state agencies with a very large impact on the State of New York.

The DVA consists of 126 employees who operate 57 different field offices across the state and the primary focus is on benefits counseling for veterans and their families. The majority of the agency's time is spent filing compensation and pension claims on behalf of veterans with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Also, time is spent connecting veterans with the VA's health care system and making sure veterans are aware of what they are entitled to regarding benefits, whether it is a federal, state, or a local benefits.

The Division is doing its best to march forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With the assistance of a federal grant received two years ago, nearly half a million dollars in technology updates for the Division was awarded. This agency is now connected statewide on a central database and connected by the Internet. Information can be obtained in seconds through the VETCOP Program installed in each computer in each field office.

Recently the Division hosted and was also part of the Steering Committee for the World War II Committee. The members met on a monthly basis to actively work on the WWII monument memorial for the State of New York. The committee was created to help design and configure the WWII monument. This fall the Office of General Services (OGS) will begin construction of this long awaited monument.

Another project the Division is working on is the newest state veteran's home in Montrose, Westchester County. New York State had been waiting a number of years in order to get high enough on the federal funding list. This is a \$56 million project, which will be a 250 bed facility built on the Montrose VA Medical Center campus. Completion is expected sometime early next year.

George continued by stating the Division submits a report monthly to the Governor. Added to this monthly report will be recommendations and ideas from the Commission for the Governor's review.

In addition, if there are legislation issues to be addressed the Commission is an avenue for quick input. Concerns and issues can also be brought to Washington through representatives directed from the Commission.

The next topic for discussion was a review of the Interagency Task Force. This committee was created a little over a year ago. It became apparent that one of the problems veterans have in New York State is the fact that legislation that affects veterans is fragmented and it is in many different agencies and organizations. There needed to be a specific place to collect clear information pertaining to veterans. The other original purpose of creating the Interagency Task Force Committee was to gather a representative(s) from different agencies and/or organization to discuss the variety of programs each group had to offer. This group began with eight representatives and now it has grown to more than 70 different agencies participating on the Task Force.

One example of an accomplishment through the Task Force is the 55c program. This issue was discussed openly and the problems were identified and corrected. This positive outcome came about with the assistance of many different agencies.

George stated that one of the reasons for the Interagency Task Force was to make agencies and organization aware of the Division of Veterans' Affairs and to give them an insight of what the division does for veterans. Our mission in the Division is to get veterans connected to what they have earned.

Mr. Peets and Mr. Whitehead, Commission members, commented how amazed they were of the veterans who do not know they even have special benefits. Mr. Whitehead requested to take home brochures and pamphlets in order to notify the veterans in his community the benefits they are entitled to.

We need to be able to identify veterans. George said one way we could identify veterans is if county social services would identify veterans when they are receiving SS benefits. A plus would be that county money could be saved if the veteran uses the VA benefits.

General Fenimore said that a video could be made informing veterans of what is available to them. This video could be sent to American Legions, VFW Posts, DAV and other veterans' organizations. The veterans' organization could invite veterans in to view the video and inform their community in that respect.

Mr. Harrington, a Commission member, commented on the town tax collector advertising veterans' property tax with a brochure in the tax collector's office. Herman continued by stating how important the health care issue is and also how Medicare can't pay a VA hospital. In other words, veterans are going elsewhere for health care where their Medicare is accepted.

George stated that for the next Commission meeting he would have a representative from Network 2 or 3 come and discuss, with the members of the Commission, the VA health care issues

Mr. Harrington also stated another concern. He said the Saratoga Cemetery burial team has no place to store their rifles and no warm place to assemble prior to a burial event. This is another issue that needs to be addressed.

Next, Honorable Ron Tocci commended George for the fine job he has accomplished and also Assemblyman Tocci thanked General Fenimore for the great things that have happened with DMNA.

Assemblyman Tocci continued by saying the Commission is a place to prioritize the issues that need to be resolved. Ron commented on the Interagency Task Force and how he would like to see a list of all the veterans' benefits that are provided by all the agencies in the State of New York. Working together we can define what our goals really should be. The Tuition Assistance Program is an example of a program that is out front with an increase in their recruitment and funding. This is one of the best-kept secrets in the State.

Assemblyman Tocci stated that what needs to be done, legislatively, is to find a way for the tax assessors to include, along with the tax bill, a form stating that if you are a veteran this benefit is available to you. This is one way to identify veterans.

George stated that the Division has gone to the county tax assessors and requested them to provide the alternate property tax exemption list. The Division has received responses from 58 out of the 62 counties. This is all strictly voluntary. The Division distributed the list of 240,000 names to Network 3 which included; New York City, Nassau, Suffolk, Orange and Rockland counties. Network 3 was extremely grateful because those names are their customers or potential customers. This is an example of how federal, local and state government all works together for a common purpose.

Assemblyman Tocci continued by saying that we have a bill in both houses that is trying to encourage municipalities to participate in creating veterans' cemetery. The state would pick up 50% of the cost of operations if a town, city, or county decided to implement their own veterans' cemetery. Privately, 25% of the cost would be picked up. This is to try and encourage the implementation of more cemeteries throughout the state of New York. This issue should be a priority.

Another priority is we need to continue other avenues to identify the veterans. In New York City Social Services is suppose to identify the veterans, but it appears that Social Services is not asking the appropriate questions. We need to just identify people with military experience and then find another way to obtain necessary information.

Assemblyman Tocci noted there are so many veterans that are not counted for in New York State that the state loses a tremendous amount of money. Then the system suffers more than it already does. How to identify the people with military experience should also be a priority.

Part of the problem identifying veterans is the fact that military service is protected under the Federal Privacy Act. You can not disseminate that information to anyone for any reason. The Division was successful with the property tax exemption list because the veteran had to release their DD214 to qualify for the benefit. The list of who has a property tax exemption benefit is public. Unfortunately this only identifies veterans who own their own home. We are probably receiving 60% of the total veteran population. How do we reach the other 40%?

The buy back bill was the next issue to be discussed. Assemblyman Tocci stated that Senator Morahan has introduced his bill to the Senate with zero cost to the veteran and then there are two other bills; one with a 3% cost to the veteran and another with a 5% cost. It is down to the question of money.

The next meeting will be in July. Issues will be identified and an agenda will be distributed prior to the next meeting. Names, addresses and phone numbers of the members will be included.

Meeting adjourned at 2:30 p.m.

**VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMISSION  
MINUTES  
JULY 11, 2000  
ALBANY, NEW YORK**

**Attendees:**

General John (Jack) H. Fenimore V, Adjutant General, DMNA  
Honorable Charles H. Nesbitt, New York State Assembly  
George P. Basher, Director DVA  
Harvey McCagg, Executive Deputy Director, DVA  
Gordon Hennessy, Director Health Facilities Management, Dept. of Health (DOH)  
Don Brown, Health Facilities Management, DOH  
Karen Cally, Intern, DOH  
William O'Connor, Office of General Services  
Jim Jamieson, Office of General Services  
Peter Iodice, Former Westchester County Veterans Service Agency Director  
Bill O'Malley, Retired Navy, Chairman of Niskayuna Republican Party, Manager  
Commonwealth Financial Network  
Ann Baglio, Retired US Air Force, American Legion Post Adjutant & Chairperson  
WINAL (Women in the American Legion)  
Tom Brady, Director County Veterans Service Bureau  
Ben Peets, Retired Army 45 year term  
James Haggerty, Department of Labor, Korean Veteran  
Herman Harrington, WWII Veteran, Past State American Legion Commander  
Mary Quay, Secretary & Recorder, DVA

Director George Basher opened the meeting by thanking everyone for taking the time to participate in this meeting.

**BRIEFING ON VETERANS' PROJECTS:**

- ❖ ***Construction of the new state veterans' nursing home in Montrose, New York***  
Joint efforts between the State Dormitory Authority, DVA and DOH  
Analysis given by Don Brown, Health Facilities Management, DOH
- ❖ ***WWII Memorial Project***  
Partnership with OGS, DMNA, DVA and Steering Committee  
Update given by Bill O'Connor, Office of General Services
- ❖ ***Syracuse Developmental Project***  
Director George Basher, DVA, gave an overview and progress report on the project.
- ❖ ***Interagency Task Force***  
Director George Basher gave a synopsis of the Interagency Task Force Committee

**DVA'S BUDGET:**

Director Basher reviewed the Division's budget with a description of how the money is spent: rent, purchasing, personnel, location of offices, furniture, etc. In the future when issues are presented to the Division of Budget those issues should be released to this Commission for review and comment.

### **VA & DVA BENEFITS**

Director Basher requested suggestions from the committee members to assist in conveying the message to New York State veterans of their eligibility of benefits offered by the State and the VA Hospital.

Assemblyman Nesbitt stated that members of the legislature often do veterans' mailings. One strategy could be to directly provide the message to the members of the legislature (211 total) so the legislator could spread the word in their newsletter.

Director Basher requested a schedule of dates when the mailings are taking place so the Division could provide the best possible information.

VAC Committee members will be placed on the Division's mailing list.

### **PREVIOUS VAC ISSUE**

Ben Peets requested information regarding military detail for veteran's burial. Mr Peets was referring to personnel, funding, etc. General Fenimore stated he will obtain information concerning this issue.

Assemblyman Nesbitt noted that High School students have played taps for veterans burials. It is an experience for the student which gives him/her a greater understanding of the importance of a veteran.

### **NEXT VAC MEETING**

- ✓ Please email suggestions for the next VAC agenda to Director Basher at: [gbasher@veterans.state.ny.us](mailto:gbasher@veterans.state.ny.us).
- ✓ Next VAC meeting will begin at 1:00 p.m..
- ✓ Second week in October, 2000.

Thank you for your time and participation.