

**VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMISSION  
MINUTES  
APRIL 13, 2004  
NYS DIVISION OF MILITARY AND NAVAL AFFAIRS  
LATHAM, NEW YORK**

**ATTENDEES:**

George Basher	DVA
Harvey McCagg	DVA
Charles Phillips	DMNA
Scott Hommel	DMNA
Bob Reiter	VSA
Mary Quay (Recorder)	DVA

Commission Members:

Adjutant General Thomas B. Maguire, Jr.  
Ben Peets  
Dorsey Whitehead  
Harold Cronin

**OPENING REMARKS**

Director of the New York State Division of Veterans' Affairs, George Basher opened the meeting with introductions around the table and then a show of appreciation to General Maguire for hosting the VAC meeting at the Division of Military and Naval Affairs.

The Director continued by stating his concern for the difficulty of raising a quorum for the Commission meetings to take place. The Director announced that in the future VAC meetings will be held twice a year.

**AGENDA ITEMS**

**NYS DIVISION OF VETERANS' AFFAIRS UPDATES:**

**Budget Issues:**

Director Basher stated that the Division's funding has held steady through the budget process for the upcoming year. Over the past several years, the Division's norm has been a decrease in the yearly budget, but, to date, the Division has received no cuts to this year's fiscal budget nor to the Division's personnel. Director Basher said the reason for the positive results is the Division is measuring the number of veterans' claims processed through the agency and also the monetary awards granted New York's veterans.

**Division Issues:**

- In the year 2003 the Division processed over 8,700 veterans' claims. The Director stated the Division is measuring the value the agency has to the State of New York.
- The Division is in the process of restructuring the agency. The Development Team Pilot Program, which has been up and running for over a year in the Buffalo Regional Office, is in the process of being replicated at the New York City Regional Office in the near future. The Director's vision is to see this pilot program move out nationwide.
- Commission members recommended that the Division submit to budget for part-time assistance where the need is. General Maguire referred to retirement groups to solicit.

- Dorsey Whitehead praised a Division State Veterans Counselor for the time and efforts put forth on his behalf for negotiation purposed for his VA claim. Whitehead noted the Division needs adequate people to accomplish the mission.

**Identifying Homeward Bound Soldiers:**

- Director Basher announced that the VA Medical Center is hosting a two-day informational seminar, beginning April 19<sup>th</sup> and ending April 20<sup>th</sup>. It was suggested that Chuck Phillips attend. General Maguire suggested a 60 to 90 days, after returning home, welcome home party to notify the troops the benefits they are entitled Director Basher stated that Ft. Drum could give notice when the soldiers are coming home.
- Director Basher stated that through the DD214 scanning process the Division can take the names and addresses from this form and notify the discharged soldiers of benefits they may be entitled to. This is just another avenue where the Division can enlighten the troops.

**DIVISION OF MILITARY AND NAVAL AFFAIRS UPDATES**

- General Maguire presented a video displaying the varied current tasks and responsibilities assumed by the National Guard. Excellent portrayal.
- Maguire noted that guardsmen can now sign up for Tri Care.
- General Maguire continued stating the New York Naval Milita Security Stations are located throughout New York State.
- At this time General Maguire presented a coin award to Harvey McCagg for all his efforts in obtaining a welcoming home letter from the Governor. Maguire's appreciation was greatly expressed.

**Other Veterans Interests and Concerns**

- Approximately 42,000 veterans listed on Medicaid and/or welfare received a brochure created by the VA, OTDA, Department of Health and the Division outlining veterans' benefits (brochure distributed to Commission members). VA's Network 2 provided the funds for postage. This mailing was an effort to connect veterans to benefits and an attempt to get veterans on Medicaid to utilize the VA Hospitals. Director Basher noted that New York State is losing approximately 40,000 veterans a year either by death or relocation. It was noted that only 20 percent of New York's veterans use the VA Health Care System.
- Director Basher distributed materials to Commission members regarding National Association of State Directors information regarding VA Advantage NASDVA (handouts on file).
- Director Basher noted that a joint Veterans Caucus has been set up this year. Senate member and Assembly members are encouraged to participate.
- Scott Hommel reviewed the Patriot 2 Plan, Bill #S6464. He distributed the pertinent information, which is on file.

**Topic(s) for Next Meeting's Agenda**

- General Maguire noted Northern Command depends on the Guard to support our nation's defense and will be discussed during the next Commission meeting.
- The next Commission meeting is tentatively scheduled to be held at the VA Medical Center and have participation from VA member(s) to discuss expanding the VA's outreach.

**NEXT VAC MEETING**  
**SEPTEMBER 27, 2004 @ STRATTON VA MEDICAL CENTER**  
**Please mark your calendars.**



**VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMISSION  
MINUTES  
SEPTEMBER 27, 2004  
NYS DIVISION OF VETERANS' AFFAIRS CENTRAL OFFICE  
ALBANY, NEW YORK**

**ATTENDEES:**

George Basher           DVA  
Harvey McCagg         DVA  
William Brennan       DVA  
Mary Ellen Piche      VAMC  
Bob Reiter             VSA  
Mary Quay (Recorder)DVA

Commission Members:

Honorable Roy J. McDonald  
Honorable Ronald C. Tocci  
Charles Phillips  
Karl W. Kristoff  
Patrick Devine  
Dorsey M. Whitehead  
Herman G. Harrington

**OPENING REMARKS**

Director George Basher welcomed everyone to the Veterans Affairs Commission meeting. He noted that Ben Peets had all intentions in attending the Commission meeting, but due to unforeseen circumstances Ben sent his regrets.

**AGENDA ITEMS**

**NYS DIVISION OF VETERANS' AFFAIRS ACTIVITIES AND PROGRAMS:**

- Director Basher applauded the Division's counseling staff with the increase of claims processed and the awards monies that are being drawn into the State of New York. The Director stated that the process of keeping a track record of claims processed and monies awarded to veterans indicates the Division's counseling offices are doing an outstanding job. When the Division began recording the number of claims processed, annually, New York State was approximately three percentages behind the national average. Currently, New York State has increased its numbers to less than one percentage below the national rate.
- In the spring of this year, a joint project began between the Division, Office of Temporary Disability Assistance (OTDA), The Department of Health (DOH), Network 2 and Network 3 with an attempt to identify low-income veterans. The purpose of the project was to locate veterans on Medicaid and direct those veterans to their local VA Medical Center. Currently 400 plus veterans have transferred their health care from Medicaid use to the VA Medical Center care. This project is a win-win for all parties involved.

- Director Basher stated that a questionnaire would be distributed to Rensselaer County veterans identified as receiving Medicaid to inquire about their actions or non-action in choosing to obtain health care from the VA. The Director said the survey instrument was in the process of being created in Network 2, OTDA, and the Policy and Planning office in Washington DC. This survey will help determine what the barriers are. Commission Member, Mr. Whitehead, asked if all this outreach will place too much work and pressure on the Division's counseling offices. Director Basher said that the Division pays close attention to workload in the field and the performance measures assist in earmarking the offices with an overload of cases.

#### **DIVISION OF MILITARY AND NAVAL AFFAIRS UPDATE**

- Deputy Chief of Staff Charles Phillips gave an overview of activities. Deputy Chief stated over 5,000 men and women are overseas with 1,300 at Ft. Drum and Ft. Dix scheduled to deploy in the fall after a three to five month training stretch. There were approximately 2,000 troops at the Republican National Convention in New York City.
- Deputy Chief stated that many wounded veterans coming home today are amputees, have spinal cord injuries, or have posttraumatic stress disorder problems. There are Family Support Groups in place to help the families of these soldiers and to also assist the veteran coming home.

#### **OUTREACH EFFORTS**

##### **VA Healthcare System Program**

- Mary Ellen Piche, Director of the Stratton VA Medical Center began the discussion on the outreach efforts. Ms. Piche stated there are 11 Community Based Clinics in her catchment area. The location of clinics cuts down on travel issues for participating veterans. She continued saying the specialty services program unit offered at the VA Medical Centers do extremely well in those specialty areas.
- Performance measures regarding VA Medical Center services are also distributed to participating patients. Questions regarding how long did it take for the veteran to receive an appointment, and the quality of care, are just a sample of what the veterans are asked on this questionnaire.
- Another service to the veterans, as described by Ms. Piche, is the "Tell A Help." This is a service that monitors the veteran in his/her home with such issues as blood pressure, weight, etc. This is just another way to reach out to the veteran.
- Ms. Piche noted that Secretary Principi wants services for returning veterans to be even better through the VA Medical Centers.

##### **NYS Division of Veterans Affairs**

- Director Basher stated the Division and the VA will continue its outreach efforts for our returning troops with a Joint Veterans Coalition Seminar scheduled for late October in Saratoga Springs.
- Director Basher brought up another avenue of outreach. Currently the Division is receiving every returning veteran's DD214. With the receipt of the DD214 the Division distributes a letter from the Governor thanking and welcoming them home. Also enclosed with this letter is information pertaining to their local State Veterans Counseling Office. (Handouts on file)

**Division of Military and Naval Affairs**

- Deputy Chief Phillips informed the Commission of the "Freedom Salute Ceremony" where on that day all veterans, along with their family members are briefed on their health care benefits.
- Chief Deputy Phillips stated that briefings are taking place and DMNA is attempting to cover all grounds and benefits available to the returning veteran. DMNA is also trying to have family members present during the briefings.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

- Director Basher told Commission members that since the beginning of the year 2000 all DD214s are sent to the Division, have been scanned and digitally recorded. There is now a centralized location for veterans to contact us and request a copy of their DD214.
- Bob Reiter from the Rensselaer County Veterans Service Agency asked if the DD214s could be distributed to the county veteran service agencies. Director Basher noted that the Division is not allowed to release any DD214 information under the Privacy Act. Assemblyman Tocci stated that the Privacy Act should be modified. Assemblyman McDonald agreed with the recommendation. McDonald continued by stating that no one is trying to obtain private information regarding the returning veteran, only their name and place of residence. It was noted that you can not request DD214 information even through the Freedom of Information Law.
- Assemblyman Tocci made reference to the Patriot Plan 1 and 2 as a tool to assist veterans with many different issues the veterans are faced with.
- Assemblyman Tocci discussed the recently established state veterans cemetery siting committee and possible locations for state-run cemeteries for veterans.
- Assemblyman McDonald stated that we need to move on several issues and be advocates for veterans and move significant veterans issues before the Governor.
- Director Basher distributed a list of 2004 legislation to Commission members. (Copy on file)

**NEW BUSINESS**

Assemblyman Ron Tocci announced to the Commission members of his approaching retirement stating it had been a privilege and an honor to be a part of this Commission. Everyone congratulated him and thanked him for the outstanding efforts he put forth with respect to the Commission and the mission of assisting veterans in any way he could in his years of service in the legislature.

**NEXT VAC MEETING****March 10, 2005****NYS Division of Veterans' Affairs Central Office****1:00 PM****Please mark your calendars**