



**Department of
Veterans' Services**

**Kathy Hochul
Governor**

**Viviana DeCohen
Commissioner**

Veterans Service Commission Meeting April 20, 2023

VSC Attendees

John Paddock
Diana Patton
Ken Rosenblum
Tanya Nelson-Walker

DVS Attendees

Commissioner Viviana DeCohen
Executive Deputy Commissioner Joel Evans Ortiz
Deputy Commissioner Benjamin Pomerance
Deputy Commissioner Jason Chakot
Administrative Assistant 2 Mary Quay

Commissioner DeCohen opened the meeting stating that as of April 1, 2023, the new name for NYS Division of Veterans' Services was officially designated NYS Department of Veterans' Services.

Also, Director DeCohen's title has been changed to Commissioner DeCohen. Joel Evans's title has been correspondingly changed from Executive Deputy Director to Executive Deputy Commissioner along with the Deputy Directors titles throughout the Department are now Deputy Commissioners of the different units.

Along with the Department's name change and title changes, as of February 2023 the Sampson Veterans Cemetery in Romulus, New York, is now New York State's first-ever State-owned Veterans Cemetery. This was a major accomplishment which took years of planning and coordination between the state government of New York and the National Cemetery Administration.

The Department continues with another success story. Executive Deputy Commissioner Joel Evans had an idea that has led to a major accomplishment for the Department: placing Veterans Welcome Center digital kiosks in strategic locations throughout New York State. The Kiosks would notify Veterans, Service Members, and Military Families

about of the benefits New York State has to offer. The kiosks have been placed in numerous locations throughout New York such as the Welcome Centers that are located off the NYS Thruway. Already these kiosks have received excellent feedback. Many Veterans and their families who have observed these kiosks while traveling along the Thruway have been thankful for the kiosks and the information provided.

On May 16th at 11:00 a.m., there will be an unveiling of a new Veterans Welcome Center kiosks in the Concourse of Empire State Plaza in Albany. There are numerous visitors and state employees that walk through the Concourse that will now have the advantage of viewing benefits for which they are eligible by virtue of their service to our country. All Veterans Service Commission members are welcome to attend this unveiling as honored guests of our Department.

Commission DeCohen continued the meeting stating the next accomplishment the Department is providing. There will be two mobile vans traveling across New York State to assist Veterans, Service Members, and Military Families who cannot make the journey to a DVS field office. The Department is currently looking to enter into a contract with a Veteran-owned business that can outfit the vans properly for this mobile work.

In the vans the Veteran Benefits Advisors will be able to meet with clients that are unable to come to an office. The Veterans Benefits Advisors will then create a claim and submit the claim from the van. These vans will also be brought to highly visible events and rural locations. The Department is hoping to have a van at the State Fair this year. Ken Rosenblum also noted the vans will be able to accommodate our aging veterans.

John Paddock continued the meeting acknowledging the upcoming Honor Flight event taking place tomorrow, April 21st with Commissioner DeCohen as a guest speaker. She will give few words and then a prayer for their flight.

Tanya Nelson-Walker stated she is grateful for the outreach to where we are meeting the veterans where they are. Commissioner DeCohen stated it takes all of us working together to find and serve Veterans, Service Members, and Military Families properly, and she is very grateful for everyone's collaboration as well.

Diana Patton asked if there were any services going to Western New York. She stated it takes a 45-minute trip just to arrive to a VA.

Commissioner DeCohen noted that the Department's new Faith in Service initiative is going into houses of worship with health and wellness fairs. She mentioned that many Faith Leaders have never applied for services.

Benjamin Pomerance spoke on "The Restoration of Honor Act." This program provides a pathway to restore access to state benefits for Veterans who have a less-than-honorable administrative discharge due to the military's discriminatory policies regarding sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or mental health. Benjamin will send out tabling materials via email to all Commission members.

Commissioner DeCohen stated she has personally delivered the favorable Restoration of Honor Act decision letters to numerous Veterans everywhere from the Bronx to Saratoga County. The Veterans and family members have become tear-filled with the long-overdue acknowledgement of their honorable service.

At this time the floor opened to the members of the Commission to provide their updates.

Ken Rosenblum brought attention to the Veterans Treatment Court and how it has helped so many veterans with minor criminal offenses. This program has been a long-term success. There are currently 40 Treatment Courts across the state. However, participation in Veterans Treatment Court in Nassau County has declined substantially, and it is believed that numbers are down in other Veterans Treatment Courts around the state as well. Ken believes that this is a result of the new discovery rules and speedy trial rules that are now codified in New York State law. These have provided new incentives for District Attorneys' Offices to engage in quick settlements of cases. Unfortunately, this is creating quick fixes that keep cases out of Veterans Treatment Courts, even when these cases would be better served by being handled by these problem-solving courts and connecting justice-involved Veterans with treatment and services that can be life-changing in the long term.

Peddler's license was the next topic of discussion, raised by Ken Rosenblum. The title Peddler's License sounds like a "door to door" salesman. The title should and needs to be changed. Commissioner DeCohen stated the title should be Vendor's License, not Peddler's License. Benjamin Pomerance raised the point that Section 35-A of the General Business Law, which governs these licenses, does not actually use the word "peddler" in the title, and recommended that the Commission commit to henceforth using the term "Vendor's License" rather than "Peddler's License" going forward. This idea received agreement from the Commission's members.

Diana Patton notified the Commission of the gender identity training that she does throughout New York State. She will send materials to the Commission's members on laws and policies concerning improved services for Veterans who are transgender. Diana noted that while services for Veterans who are transgender have improved significantly during her lifetime, there is still plenty of room for improvement. Diana noted that there will be several programs during Pride Month (June) throughout New York State, from Plattsburgh to New York City to Buffalo, in which Veteran leaders are welcomed and encouraged to take part.

John Paddock said they were going to set up at the New York State Fair to revive the Watchfire event that was postponed for the past couple of years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Commissioner DeCohen asked, "How can we assist?" The Department stands willing, ready, and able to support this important commemorative program in any way that the Department can.

June 10 Parks and Rec will have an event taking place. Commissioner DeCohen will forward the information to the Commission.

Meeting adjourned
Mary Quay, Recorder