

INTERIM JOINT COMMITTEE ON VETERANS, MILITARY AFFAIRS, AND PUBLIC PROTECTION

Minutes of the 2nd Meeting of the 2023 Interim

July 25, 2023

Call to Order and Roll Call

The 2nd meeting of the Interim Joint Committee on Veterans, Military Affairs, and Public Protection was held on Tuesday, July 25, 2023, at 11:00 AM, in Room 154 of the Capitol Annex. Senator Rick Girdler, Chair, called the meeting to order, and the secretary called the roll.

Present were:

Members: Senator Rick Girdler, Co-Chair; Representative Walker Thomas, Co-Chair; Senators Karen Berg, Matthew Deneen, Denise Harper Angel, Jimmy Higdon, Stephen Meredith, Whitney Westerfield, Gex Williams, and Mike Wilson; Representatives John Blanton, Steve Bratcher, Stephanie Dietz, Jim Gooch Jr., Mark Hart, Matthew Koch, Savannah Maddox, Candy Massaroni, Marianne Proctor, Rebecca Raymer, Scott Sharp, Sarah Stalker, Pamela Stevenson, Ashley Tackett Laferty, and Bill Wesley.

Guests: SFC James Deneen; SFC Doug Frederick; Eric Koleda, National Director, TreatNOW Legislative Efforts; Jeff Gantt, former United States Marine Corps Sniper; Senator David Yates, Senate District 37; Detective Megan Moseley, 964C Special Victims Unit – Domestic Violence, Louisville Metro Police Department; Colonel Edwin L. Chilton, Commander, 7th Brigade – U.S. Army Cadet Command; Dr. Beth Hargis, Associate Commissioner, Office of Career and Technical Education; Tom Thompson, Division Director, Office of Career and Technical Education; Virginia Dial, President, Connect Community Village; and Lieutenant Colonel (Ret.) Dr. Tony Dotson, Director of Military and Veteran Services and Initiatives, Addiction Recovery Care.

LRC Staff: Jessica Zeh, Mark Mitchell, and Logan Schaaf.

Distinguished Veterans

SFC James Deneen and SFC Doug Frederick, Army veterans and devoted servants to their communities, were introduced by Senator Deneen and honored by the committee.

Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy for Veterans

Eric Koleda, TreatNOW State Legislative Efforts National Director, and Jeff Gantt, former United States Marine Corps Sniper, discussed hyperbaric oxygen therapy treatment (HBOT) for veterans with traumatic brain injuries (TBIs).

Mr. Koleda said that HBOT accelerates wound healing by promoting cell and tissue growth in the injured area. He discussed the viability of state government funding for the treatment, as the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) does not operate any HBOT chambers. Mr. Koleda also read the testimony of doctors who support HBOT treatments, and covered recent studies on its effects.

Mr. Gantt shared the story of his own battle with service-related TBIs and his experiences with HBOT treatments. He said that HBOT has been the most effective treatment for his injuries, and contrasted it with the mix of pills and other treatments he used before HBOT.

Responding to questions from Senator Berg, Mr. Koleda said that the infrastructure for HBOT already exists, but veterans still need to be referred. He encouraged the committee to urge physicians in their districts to explore HBOT. Mr. Gantt said that none of the veterans he works with were referred to HBOT by the VA.

Senator Berg said that in acute situations, HBOT may be effective, but she expressed concerns about the effectiveness of HBOT in stimulating dead tissue or treating chronic injuries. Mr. Koleda said that he would provide the committee with data from clinical trials and the testimony of doctors who use HBOT to treat injuries. Senator Berg said that these doctors often have a financial interest in promoting HBOT, as many of them own and operate the chambers themselves.

Responding to a question from Representative Bratcher, Mr. Gantt said that before HBOT, he was taking at least 20 prescription medications.

Representative Proctor said that she shared some of Senator Berg's concerns on the viability of HBOT for chronic injuries.

Responding to a question from Senator Meredith, Mr. Koleda said that his fiscal ask is \$750,000 per year, \$1.5 million over two years, to treat an estimated 100 to 120 veterans.

Responding to a question from Senator Higdon, Mr. Koleda said that 100 percent of the fiscal ask would go to testing and treatment, and that he covers all the administrative costs. He also noted that patients must not be using drugs or alcohol when they are in treatment, and they are tested to ensure compliance with this rule. Mr. Koleda also provided information on the history and operations of his organization, HBOT for Kentucky Vets.

Ashanti Alert System

Senator David Yates, Senate District 37, and Detective Megan Moseley with the Louisville Metro Police Department spoke in favor of a bill to create the Ashanti Alert System in Kentucky.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, Ashanti Alerts can “provide for rapid dissemination of information to law enforcement agencies, media, and the public about adults who have been reported missing along with suspect information in cases of suspected abduction.”

Senator Yates said that Ashanti Alerts can fill in the gaps not covered by other alerts like Amber, Green, Blue, and Gold.

Detective Moseley discussed the difficulties with locating a missing person who is not covered by an existing alert system.

Representative Blanton praised the idea but expressed concern about adding more responsibilities to law enforcement through legislation. Senator Yates said that he would work with the Kentucky State Police on the legislation.

Senator Harper Angel said that the committee should consider testimony on all of the alert systems.

Army JROTC Pilot Program

Colonel Edwin L. Chilton, Commander, 7th Brigade – U.S. Army Cadet Command; Dr. Beth Hargis, Associate Commissioner, Office of Career and Technical Education; and Tom Thompson, Division Director, Office of Career and Technical Education discussed the pilot project between the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) and the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE).

The Kentucky Director of Army Instruction (DAI) program standardizes all functions for the JROTC programs in a district. A DAI operation cannot operate outside of its given school district. Colonel Chilton spoke about the potential benefits of a DAI pilot program at the state level, including improved oversight, accountability, logistics, and recruiting assistance.

Dr. Hargis and Mr. Thompson covered the KDE’s role in the pilot program. In order to implement the program, KDE is asking for \$1.2 million over two years.

Responding to a question from Representative Thomas, Dr. Hargis said that the KDE is asking for a line item in the budget.

Responding to a question from Senator Higdon, Colonel Chilton said that the six instructors in the pilot program would all be retired military, which is a requirement for JROTC instruction. The pay for each of the six instructor positions would vary based on the military rank at which they retired.

Responding to a question from Senator Meredith, Mr. Thompson said that he would provide the committee with a list of existing JROTC programs in Kentucky schools.

Connect Community Village and Bluegrass Veterans Ranch

Virginia Dial, President of Connect Community Village, and Lieutenant Colonel (Ret.) Dr. Tony Dotson, Director of Military and Veteran Services and Initiatives for Addiction Recovery Care spoke about their efforts to support veterans transitioning back to civilian life and the creation of the Bluegrass Veterans Ranch.

The Bluegrass Veterans Ranch would house veterans on a working ranch, where they would participate in group learning sessions, vocational training, gardening, food preparation, beekeeping, arts, music, and physical fitness over the course of their one year stay.

Ms. Dial said that Connect Community Village is asking for \$1.5 million to create the Bluegrass Veterans Ranch.

Dr. Dotson praised the efforts of Ms. Dial and discussed his own background assisting veterans. He also discussed some of the important interventions for veterans as they transition to civilian life.

Representative Stevenson praised the efforts of Ms. Dial and Dr. Dotson.

Responding to questions from Senator Berg, Ms. Dial said that referrals to the Veterans Ranch will come from the VA, churches, judicial system, recovery programs, and others. She also said that there will be zero tolerance for drug and alcohol abuse, but that they will assist with placing the veteran in a recovery program.

Responding to a question from Representative Stalker, Ms. Dial discussed the proposed process for mental health evaluation and care at the ranch.

With no further business before the committee, the meeting was adjourned at 1:00 PM. The next meeting of the Interim Joint Committee on Veterans, Military Affairs, and Public Protection is scheduled for Tuesday, August 22, 2023, at 11:00 AM in Room 154 of the Capitol Annex.