

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

Minutes of the 1st Meeting of the 2019 Interim

August 23, 2019

Call to Order and Roll Call

The 1st meeting of the Interim Joint Committee on Veterans, Military Affairs, and Public Protection was held on Friday, August 23, 2019, at 1:00 PM, in Room 149 of the Capitol Annex. Representative Tim Moore, Chair, called the meeting to order, and the secretary called the roll.

Present were:

Members: Senator Albert Robinson, Co-Chair; Representative Tim Moore, Co-Chair; Senators Julian M. Carroll, C.B. Embry Jr., Denise Harper Angel, Ernie Harris, Dennis Parrett, Wil Schroder, Brandon Smith, and Mike Wilson; Representatives John Blanton, Myron Dossett, Jim DuPlessis, Mark Hart, Matthew Koch, Scott Lewis, C. Ed Massey, Patti Minter, Rob Rothenburger, Dean Schamore, Walker Thomas, Susan Westrom, Buddy Wheatley, Rob Wiederstein, and Les Yates.

Guests: Samuel Deeds, Distinguished Veteran; Commissioner Benjamin Adams, Kentucky Department of Veterans Affairs, Deputy Commissioner Dean Stoops, Kentucky Department of Veterans Affairs, Mark Bowman, Executive Director of Veteran Centers; Commissioner Richard Sanders, Kentucky State Police, John Tilley, Secretary of Kentucky Justice and Public Safety Cabinet, Heather Wagers, Cabinet Legislative Director; Brigadier General (Ret.) Steve Bullard, Executive Director, Kentucky Commission on Military Affairs, Chief Jim Sims, National Guard Association of Kentucky, John Harvey, President of the National Guard Association of Kentucky; Chief Donald Bowman, Veterans Outreach Coordinator of the Epilepsy Foundation of Kentuckiana, Alex Nauert, Brain Injury Alliance of Kentucky

LRC Staff: Jonathan Philpot, Elizabeth Hardy, and Jamie Scowcroft

Distinguished Veteran

Gunnery Sergeant (Ret.) Samuel Deeds was raised in Maine. He served more than 14 years in the United States Marine Corps before retiring in 2011 due to an injury received in Iraq by two Improvised Explosive Devices. After retiring, he struggled with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury. He joined a professional skydive team called Team Fast Tracks that helped him find his purpose of giving back to others.

Kentucky Department of Veterans Affairs

General Ben Adams from the Kentucky Department of Veterans Affairs spoke on several funding goals for the years 2020 through 2022. These priorities include: \$480K for Nurse Student Loan Repayment Program and \$25 million for competitive salaries for Nursing Staff, \$2 million for 20 additional Benefits Reps, \$200,000 for Homeless Veterans Program, and \$2.5 million for design work on the Bowling Green Veterans Center Project.

General Adams also went over legislative priorities for the year 2020. Those priorities include: Exempt military retired pay and survivor benefits from state income tax, exempt Veteran Service Organizations from property tax, the design and preconstruction of Bowling Green Veterans Center, clarify eligibility for special military license plate and provide a special military license plate for spouses as well, amend KRS 132.810 to expand the homestead exemption in the Constitution to include surviving un-remarried spouses of disabled veterans of the United States Armed Forces, etc.

Senator Schroder made a comment regarding the Honor and Remember flag as the state's emblem of the service did have some feedback that was not in favor of this legislation. General Adams responded that he has heard some of the negative feedback as well but dictated this is all in an effort not to forget veteran sacrifices in the state of Kentucky.

In response to Representative Blanton's question on updates on bed appropriation of privatizing more rooms so beds can be put back in them, General Adams said that they are still studying how to go from semi-private to private rooms.

Representative Schamore commented that he supports allowing certification as a Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business because when his company gets out of state bids they ask for certification that they do not have.

Representative Massey made a comment in regards to Senator Schroder's comment that he believed the feedback had shifted into a more positive direction because the flag is not there to replace the American flag but to honor Veterans.

In response to Representative DuPlessis question, General Adams stated that they are unsure how much more revenue they will bring in once they get 20 additional Benefit Reps. He anticipates however, there will be an increase beyond the \$2 million requested.

Kentucky State Police

John Tilley, Secretary of Kentucky Justice and Public Safety Cabinet, spoke about the Kentucky state lab technicians and the decrease in employee numbers. The Kentucky crime lab is funded by state tax dollars and about 120 individuals work there. It has significant turnover because of low pay. Many times the state will pay to train lab technicians who then get a job in another state because the pay is up to 30 percent more. He also said that Kentucky State Police pay ranks last in the country and every four years there is a 40 percent turnover.

Commissioner Sanders talked about the decline in Kentucky State Trooper numbers. Many police officers leave the state police to work at local police stations or civilian jobs that have higher pay. Kentucky State Police ranks 51st out of all state law enforcement agencies when it comes to pay. Commissioner Sanders would like the pay increased by

\$10,000 so the starting pay would be \$46,000 but said even a \$4,000 increase would help. In 2006 there were about 1,079 state troopers and today there are only 794 troopers. A higher starting salary is important for recruitment and retainment of troopers.

Representative Wiederstein asked if there was an annual attrition rate figured for the Kentucky State Police. In response, Commissioner Sanders explained that over the last couple of years around 30 to 40 troopers retired which is higher than usual. He anticipates those numbers to decrease due to the progressive pay scale and troopers are staying to receive their High-3 or High-5 retirement plan.

Representative DuPlessis explained that if a \$5,000 raise was given to every current trooper would cost the state about \$3.7 million. He then asked if it was possible to pay the current troopers with that pool of money to keep up retention in the troops. Commissioner Sanders explained that because of the progressive pay scale, troopers have raises to look forward to. He explained that the real problem lies within the entry level pay and if it was higher, more people would apply.

Representative Blanton commented that because many of these troopers are retiring sooner, the Commonwealth is losing 10 to 15 years of service from that person because there is not a competitive salary. He continued by saying the number of people applying has steadily declined over the last 20 years and there is no way by looking at that to determine if the pension system has contributed to the lack of applicants. Representative Blanton said a lot of local law enforcement agencies pay more and that is what contributes to low applicant numbers.

Kentucky Commission on Military Affairs

Brigadier General Steve Bullard wanted to go over their priorities discussed with Governor Bevin. The main priority is making Kentucky the most military friendly state in the country. To help meet that goal, the Kentucky Commission on Military Affairs will work with the general assembly, Veterans Affairs, and the Joint Executive Council of Veterans Organizations. He explained that attracting senior military leaders to work in the industry are also means of becoming the most military friendly state.

In response to Representative Rothenburger's question, Brigadier General Bullard explained that his Executive Director position was created in the late 1990s to be the strategic core to manage the efforts of all state agencies and others that are willing to assist in the development of business and industry. He went on to say that it was also created to create opportunities for defense contractors and for veterans to do defense related jobs in the industry.

National Guard Association of Kentucky

John Harvey of the National Guard Association of Kentucky spoke about the state sponsored life insurance program. When a new recruit joins the National Guard they are automatically eligible for a \$1,000 life insurance benefit. However, they can increase that up to \$50,000 for the National Guard member and up to \$10,000 for a family member. With this policy, the beneficiary will receive their payment within 24 hours of their loved

one passing away. Mr. Harvey went on to say they wanted the Adjutant General to be designated as the official sponsor for the state sponsored life insurance program.

Chief Jim Sims, Executive Director of the National Guard Association of Kentucky added that the association represents all members of the Kentucky National Guard. There are over 13,000 active policies under the state sponsored life insurance program. On top of the \$1,000, members have the opportunity to receive an additional \$10,000 benefit for free. Chief Sims' concern is they are not allowed to explain the additional benefit to members at all because of the general counsel for the TAG disagrees. Therefore, many National Guard members don't know about the free bonus of \$10,000.

The Epilepsy Foundation of Kentuckiana

Chief Donald Bow, Veterans Outreach Coordinator spoke about a program that started nine years ago called Operation Outreach. The program increases epilepsy awareness and provides advocacy services, education, prevention, outreaches, and support services. The goal is to ensure all Kentucky veterans and their families understand there is an increased risk of Post Traumatic Epilepsy of veterans who have been impacted by Traumatic Brain Injury or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. To reach veterans across the state, the Epilepsy Foundation works closely with numerous Veterans Organizations to ensure that every veteran they meet receives seizure education and resources to connect with Veterans Affairs and other Veterans Organizations.

Brain Injury Alliance of Kentucky

Alex Nauert from Brain Injury Alliance of Kentucky spoke about their current efforts of 2019. They have assisted over 500 veterans in Kentucky over the last four years. An updated Resource journal has also been distributed across the state at places like universities, hospitals, veteran organizations, and state veteran councils. The alliance also uses social media and Veterans Service Organizations as a key to connect with veterans and communities.

Other Business

Chairman Moore made an announcement regarding a historic marker that will be placed in honor of a plane crash that happened in 1958 during a refueling operation. He also talked about the opportunity to attend the last two Honor Flights of this year.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:44 PM.