

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

Minutes of the 4th Meeting of the 2020 Interim

September 23, 2020

Call to Order and Roll Call

The 4th meeting of the Interim Joint Committee on Veterans, Military Affairs, and Public Protection was held on Wednesday, September 23, 2020, at 10:00 AM, in Room 171 of the Capitol Annex. Senator C.B. Embry Jr., Chair, called the meeting to order, and the secretary called the roll.

Present were:

Members: Representative Walker Thomas, Co-Chair; Senator C.B. Embry Jr., Co-Chair Designate; Senators Karen Berg, Denise Harper Angel, Jimmy Higdon, Dennis Parrett, Wil Schroder, Brandon Smith, Whitney Westerfield, and Mike Wilson; Representatives John Blanton, Myron Dossett, Jim DuPlessis, Chris Fugate, Al Gentry, Mark Hart, Samara Heavrin, Kathy Hinkle, Scott Lewis, C. Ed Massey, Patti Minter, Dean Schamore, Buddy Wheatley, and Lisa Willner.

Guests: Hon. Mitch Perry, Circuit Judge, Jefferson Circuit Court; Tina Messer, Manager, Department of Specialty Courts, Administrative Office of the Courts; Dr. Monica Himes, PhD, LCSW, Assistant Professor of Social Work, Morehead State University; Donietta Hawkey, State Director- Kentucky, U.S. Department of Labor, Veterans' Employment and Training Service; Jason Hutchinson, Veteran Program Coordinator, Career Development Office; Polly A. Ruddick, Director-Office of Homelessness Prevention and Intervention, Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government; Stephanie Gibson, LCSW, Homeless Program Manager, Lexington VA Health Care System; Anne Vandervort, Senior Director of Veteran Services, Volunteers of America Mid-States; Jim Reed, Staff to the National Conference of State Legislatures Military and Veterans Affairs Task Force, Group Director-Environment, Energy, and Transportation

LRC Staff: Jessica Zeh, Andrew Salman, Elizabeth Hardy, and Kelsey Lockhart

Approval of August 26, 2020 Minutes

Representative Blanton moved to approve the August meeting minutes. Senator Wilson seconded the motion. The minutes were approved.

Veterans Treatment Courts

Monica Hines, PhD, LCSW, Assistant Professor of Social Work at Morehead State University, discussed her doctoral dissertation regarding the Kentucky Veterans Treatment Courts (VTC). Her work was made possible through a collaboration with the Kentucky Administrative Office of the Courts and grants from the Bureau of Justice Assistance. Her research began in 2016 with the idea to collect information and data was collected from 2012-2016 in Jefferson County and from 2013-2017 in Hardin County: the first two counties to have VTC. The grant required a process evaluation, their initial goal was to see how personal identifiers such as age, gender, housing status, drug of choice, employment status, and the court process could impact veterans.

She compared a national study of VTC data with Kentucky VTC data to see potential differences. The samples of Kentucky VTC participants were 90 percent male, mostly aged 30-39 (about 1/3 of participants), almost 80 percent white, 35 percent were divorced, 35 percent primarily use alcohol, 57 percent unemployed when entering the VTC, 83 percent were stably housed, and most notably 66 percent of Kentucky participants had some combat history while the national survey shows 45 percent.

Dr. Hines went on to say 47 percent of the Kentucky sample completed the program and 64 percent that entered program did not recidivate. Kentucky exhibited higher success than the national level survey. Gender is associated with higher rates of completion and females are more likely to finish than males, which is different than most drug courts. Younger veterans were more likely to recidivate, making her want to increase assistance to the 30-39 age group. Those with stable housing are less likely to recidivate, which makes veteran housing incredibly important. Significant relationship between program completion and criminal recidivism was the largest correlation. VTC does well celebrating successes which gives a sense of pride to veterans.

Working with Hardin County and Northern Kentucky VTC, they have discussed over the last few weeks how COVID-19 has impacted their work. They have continued services for veterans nearly uninterrupted. Overall they have adjusted well, the veterans have an adaptability and flexibility the general public may not have which has helped them smoothly transition away from many face-to-face meetings.

Dr. Hines has a unique vantage point observing the courts as an outsider and commends the VTC for the work that they're doing. VTCs and their staff are passionate about what they do, take the responsibility seriously, and know that the success of VTC doesn't just benefit the veterans but also the community. She stated the VTC upholds the promise to care for veterans once their service is over, regardless of their situation or circumstance.

The Honorable Judge Mitch Perry of the Jefferson Circuit Court, stated that as a veteran himself, he is passionate about the VTC. Judge Perry has been a Circuit Judge for 14 years, practiced law in governmental affairs, and has seen both the lawyer and judge's

perspective in the court. Judge Perry commented on the high level of influence Kentucky has on the US military due to Fort Knox and Fort Campbell.

Judge Perry says that he works with VTC and they deal with “justice-involved veterans” which is a polite term for “I’ve been charged with a crime”. If that person fits the profile they can be a participant in VTC, complete an assessment to make sure they understand requirements, and the program can then be completed within 18 months. The team reports to Judge Perry if a veteran has any problems, which is when they take action to redirect them back to the proper, sober-living path. Participants are typically charged with possession of a controlled substance, a DUI (second, third, or fourth offense), and sometimes a mental illness.

When working with veterans, often the first step is to find out where the veteran came from: what unit were they assigned, where they were deployed, were they in combat, and were they in the Middle East. Judge Perry stated that he has personally experienced many of these circumstances making his perspective of these factors personal and gives him the ability to empathize with their past.

Judge Perry went on to say that the VTC needs funding. There is no independent funding stream in Kentucky for VTC, so they have social workers and counselors carve out time to work when they can for the VTC. There are five counties in Kentucky that have VTC: Christian, Fayette, Hardin, Jefferson, and Kenton. Unless the judges secure a grant for the VTC, it cannot exist. He requested that the committee have a dedicated VTC treatment coordinator who is a veteran themselves and can work with veterans as he does.

Over the five counties with VTCs, 85 people are currently involved. Since 2012, 350 people have entered the VTC statewide and the program’s had 125 successful completions.

Judge Perry and Allison Kern often reach out to independent groups that want to help veterans. Judge Perry advised the committee to immediately hire someone dedicated to Jefferson County as an outreach specialist to make sure they are helping everyone that they can. He closed by saying the funds would be used to hire people that are directly related to finding the people who need the help via outreach coordinators.

In response to Representative Gentry’s question, Judge Perry stated that the court was started in 2012 and Judge David Holton was the first judge of the VTC. He went on to say that the VTC is successful and the vast majority of participants graduate, though it may take them a little while.

Senator Parrett commented that Judge Holton is indeed very passionate about the VTC. He went on to say that he contacted judges from his district that morning and they think it is very successful based on the people that they’ve had in court and brag about the results to our veterans and the second chances. He stated that there is no question that

this program is important and he's grateful for the people involved, especially Judge David Hale who helped on the pilot project for the VTC.

In response to a question from Co-Chair Thomas, Judge Perry stated that the Courts are classically a-religious, but that does not mean religion cannot be involved. Every participant attends a Narcotics Anonymous (NA) or Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meeting at some point. These programs are based on what is referred to as a "higher-power" and often discuss the higher-power step of their program. There are no faith-based initiatives, but NA and AA are somewhat predicated on this idea. He added that there are alternatives to the AA-based higher-power for those that want it.

Veteran Employment

Donietta Hawkey, United States Department of Labor State Director for Labor, Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) stated their vision is to enable all veterans to reach their full potential in the workplace and to help those individuals.

The VETS service operates off of four P's: Prepare, Provide, Protect, and Promote. The agency provides employment workshops which provide transitioning service members with information on how to distinguish between a federal and civilian resume. The state workforce agency is funded through the Jobs for Veterans State Grant (JVSG). The JVSG serves individuals that have significant barriers to employment. These can be justice-involved veterans, individuals who have been unable to find employment for 27 weeks after transitioning out of the military, low-income veterans, and Vietnam-era veterans.

Their office is the regulatory agency for the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) and Veterans' Preference which partners with Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) which all work towards the protection of veterans in the job field they chose after service. The office promotes the hiring of veterans by utilizing employer outreach and HIRE Vets Medallion (Honoring Investments in Recruiting and Employing American Military Veterans award) for recognizing employers that are veteran friendly through achieving certain credentials.

Veteran unemployment has increased due to COVID-19. Previously, the annual US veteran unemployment rate was at 3.1 percent, the lowest since 2000. As of June 2020, the US veteran unemployment rate is 8.8 percent and the Kentucky veteran unemployment rate is 10.2 percent. There are about 775,000 veterans unemployed nationwide.

Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP) is the only federal program that focuses exclusively on employment of veterans who are experiencing homelessness. HVRP provides employment resources and training services to assist in reintegrating homeless veterans into meaningful employment within the labor force. The HVRP Grant can provide training resources, tools to service the veterans who need assistance, work boots, and anything that will help them gain employment. Some challenges for Kentucky

grantees have been transportation and internet in rural areas. The HVRP grant is awarded annually, so the areas that are covered may change yearly.

Jason Hutchinson, Veteran Program Coordinator of the Career Development Office and the Jobs for Veterans State Grant (JVSG) stated the JVSG program provides federal funding for a formula grant to state workforce agencies to assist in hiring staff to provide individualized career and training-related services to veterans and eligible persons with significant barriers to employment and assist employers to fill their workforce needs with job-seeking veterans. Title 38 under the United States Code, Section 4102A (b) 5 (38 U.S.C. §4102A(b)5) authorizes funds provided to each state to staff and support Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program (DVOP) specialists, Local Veterans' Employment Representatives (LVER) staff, and the reasonable costs associated with such representatives.

The DVOP specialists provide individualized career services to veterans with significant barriers to employment such as a disability, homelessness or lack of stable housing, being discharged from the military within the last three years and been unemployed within the last twelve months, previous incarceration, lacking a high school education or GED, being a Vietnam veteran, or having income below the poverty guideline. The LVER conducts outreach to employers and business associations, engage in advocacy efforts with hiring executives to increase employment opportunities, and encourage the hiring of disabled veterans. Consolidated position staff serve a dual role as DVOP and LVER. All staff members are veterans and represent all branches of the military.

Of the veterans who received JVSG service for Q2-2020 (January, February, and March) there was an increase of newly enrolled veterans into case management by 56 percent, the number of veterans that exited case management increased by 235 percent, and the number of veterans that exited case management due to employment or improved wages increased by 61 percent.

One thing they would like to see in response to COVID-19 is better telecommuting. They want to mimic states that were prepared with all virtual services by having a veteran-specific virtual platform to assist in connecting veterans with employers and other partners and to provide virtual career and resource fairs. Additionally, COVID-19 has made this particularly challenging because JVSG was enlisted to assist with unemployment claims, which forced them to temporarily pause their mission to assist the general public.

A major state resource is the Hilton Honors Military Program which provides veterans and their spouses approximately 3 nights to stay at a Hilton brand hotel for job-search related activities. Since its introduction in June 2020, two transitioning veterans have been approved to utilize the Hilton Honors Military Program to assist in job searching and house hunting activities to assist their civilian transition into Kentucky. The Priority of Service program gives those who were honorably discharged from the military a status

of “covered” and they have precedence over “non-covered” persons in obtaining services funded by the Department of Labor.

In response to a question from Senator Higdon, Jason Hutchinson stated that he would be agreeable to providing his contact information with the committee to provide to veterans who contact legislators. Senator Higdon added that would be helpful to everyone since service members frequently reach out to legislators for resources.

Veteran Homelessness

Polly Ruddick, Director of the Office of Homelessness Prevention and Intervention for the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government, began by describing their definition of veteran for the purpose of the program as “any person who served at least one day of active duty in the armed forces, regardless of the type of discharge they received.” Her responsibilities are to coordinate the implementation of housing and service systems that include outreach, engagement and assessment with shelter and housing, supportive services, and prevention strategies. This office was formed in 2014 under Mayor Jim Gray when he accepted the Mayor’s Challenge to end veterans’ homelessness and the community established the Every Veteran Housed Committee. Its mission is to develop and implement a system that would make veteran homelessness rare, brief, and non-reoccurring. The core response team meets bi-weekly to discuss benchmarks and conduct case conferencing and the full committee meets bi-monthly.

The goal is to quickly identify every veteran experiencing homelessness, whether they are sheltered or unsheltered. This system is built on a housing-first model. The criteria is that they have to identify everyone needing housing, provide them immediate shelter, give a limited basis for transitional housing, and move them to permanent housing within 30 days.

Fayette County has not yet met the benchmark of having every veteran experiencing chronic or long-term homelessness ended: there are currently two chronically long-term veterans who do not have permanent housing. The program offers permanent housing to veterans within 6 days. The community has sufficient housing capacity, Fayette County permanently housed 29 households in the last 90 days. They identified an additional 22 veterans experiencing homelessness during that time, however only five selected to access a service-intensive transitional housing program. The program only uses transitional housing when absolutely necessary.

Stephanie Gibson, LCSW, Homeless Program Manager of the Lexington VA Health Care System, began by thanking the committee for the opportunity to share the journey of ending veteran homelessness in Lexington. Communication with community partnerships is essential in the process of ending veteran homelessness. Agencies must go wherever the veteran is to begin building rapport and the ongoing assessment helps build the trust needed to get them into permanent housing.

The agency aims to assist with many of the barriers for veterans to overcome, such as felonies and misdemeanors, mental health, and substance use. There are many types of housing, such as transitional, short-term voucher, HUD voucher, and senior- and income-based for which they advocate on behalf of veterans to landlords and other agencies. HUD Choice Vouchers help supply subsidies to veterans. Once the veteran is in housing, the VA Healthcare System helps in any way possible to propel them in life. She closed saying that veteran feedback is essential to the success of this program.

Anne Vandervort, Senior Director of Veteran Services from Volunteers of America Mid-States, explained that Volunteers of America Mid-States has an extensive grant from the VA called the Supportive Services for Veterans Families. This is an essential component in the community working towards permanent housing by promoting housing stability, providing case management services, working to identify veterans experiencing homelessness, and assisting veterans into a program that can work towards permanent housing and getting them off of the street.

Lexington was granted the award of effectively ending veteran homelessness in March of 2019. Volunteers of America is one of four providers for Kentucky and cover a large area including Fayette and the surrounding counties, Jefferson and the surrounding counties, and much of Eastern Kentucky. Due to COVID-19, the Volunteers of American Mid-States have been awarded some CARES funding, which allowed the agency to provide more supportive services for veterans and their families. Each grantee was awarded about 53 percent more of their grant money which helped them contact some veterans that are more difficult to reach. Some services have been expanded in emergency housing assistance. She went on to say that the agency is excited to add healthcare navigators in October which will help get veterans connected quickly and assist with telehealth visits if needed.

National Conference of State Legislatures

Jim Reed, Staff to the NCSL Military and Veterans Affairs Task Force Group Director-Environment, Energy, and Transportation began by explaining that NCSL is a national organization that serves all American legislatures that includes 55 members from 27 states and D.C. NCSL works to examine military community relations at the state level to bring help to veterans and their families in regard to their health and well-being. A survey was recently completed by Blue Star Families about the issues that were most important to veterans. Access to military and VA healthcare ranked highest at 49 percent, understanding of military and veteran issues ranked at 38 percent, military benefits ranked at 37 percent, PTSD/combat/stress/TBI services ranked at 30 percent, and veteran employment ranked at 30 percent. There are approximately 250 bills enacted every year in state legislatures addressing military and veterans' affairs. Some trends include expediting professional and occupational licenses for veterans and military spouses, veteran and dependent higher education tuition waivers, mental health and suicide

prevention initiatives, veteran assistance transition programs, discounts, tax credits and exemptions, and continued expansion for Veterans Treatment Courts.

He went on to say that the Veterans Military Affairs and Public Protection committee is well established in supporting veteran initiatives. Kentucky recently enacted the Green Alert for when a veteran with a mental health issue is missing, as it helps quickly identify that a veteran may be in trouble. There are four states where it is enacted: Delaware, Kentucky, Wisconsin, and West Virginia. It has been introduced in five other states. In Florida, there is now a system for alternative treatments for veterans that the VA does not pay for such as equine therapy and hyperbaric oxygen therapy. In California and Illinois, there is a proactive outreach program to veterans who served in combat, relative to suicide prevention that has proved to be helpful. There is an active task force in Illinois that has been established to make recommendations regarding veterans' service-related ailments that are not recognized by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and works to get them recognized.

The next meeting will be Wednesday, October 28, 2020 at 10:00 AM in Room 171. The National Guard Orientation Flight is on Tuesday October 13, 2020 in the morning. Watch for more information in emails.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 11:48 AM.