

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

Minutes of the 1st Meeting of the 2023 Interim

June 21, 2023

Call to Order and Roll Call

The 1st meeting of the Interim Joint Committee on Veterans, Military Affairs, and Public Protection was held on Wednesday, June 21, 2023, at 11:00 AM, in Room 154 of the Capitol Annex. Representative Walker Thomas, 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, Gary Boswell, Matthew Deneen, Denise Harper Angel, Jimmy Higdon, Stephen Meredith, Gex Williams, and Mike Wilson; Representatives Tina Bojanowski, Steve Bratcher, Stephanie Dietz, Myron Dossett, Chris Freeland, Chris Fugate, Jim Gooch Jr., Mark Hart, DJ Johnson, Candy Massaroni, Marianne Proctor, Rebecca Raymer, Scott Sharp, Sarah Stalker, Pamela Stevenson, Ashley Tackett Laferty, and Bill Wesley.

Guests: Richard Nest, Distinguished Veteran; Juan Renaud, Deputy Commissioner, Kentucky Department of Veterans Affairs (KDVA); Silas Session, Executive Director, KDVA; Brigadier General (Ret.) Steve Bullard, Executive Director, Kentucky Commission on Military Affairs; Matt Castor, Vice President of Government and Corporate Relations, USA Cares; Bill Dieruf, Board Member, USA Cares; Brian Gibson, Founder and President, Project Diehard; Michael Stoyonovich, Disabled American Veterans (Department of Kentucky); Larry Arnett, Legislative Liaison, Joint Executive Council of Veterans Organizations; and Michael Carmichael, Founder, President, and Chief Executive Officer, Check A Vet.

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

Distinguished Veteran

Richard Nest, a Vietnam veteran and long-time advocate for veterans, was honored by the committee. He thanked the committee members for their work on behalf of veterans and spoke about the need to continue to support them.

Kentucky Department of Veterans Affairs

Juan Renaud, Deputy Commissioner of the Kentucky Department of Veterans Affairs (KDVA), and Silas Session, Executive Director of the KDVA, delivered a presentation on the prevention of veteran suicide. They displayed statistics on suicide and shared data from Kentucky's Community Mental Health Centers.

Mr. Renaud highlighted his and Dr. Session's work as part of the Governor's Challenge Team for suicide prevention, detailing the short and long-term goals of the program.

Responding to a question from Senator Berg, Mr. Renaud said that his statistics focused on suicide among veterans, not the general population.

Responding to a question from Representative Dietz, Mr. Renaud said that KDVA's attorney is exploring ways to involve veterans' families more actively in suicide prevention efforts.

Responding to a question from Senator Williams, Mr. Renaud explained the statistics on suicide among veterans treated at a Community Mental Health Center.

Senator Higdon praised the work of KDVA.

Representative Sharp praised the work of KDVA and asked what might explain the difference in the rate of suicide among members of the National Guard compared to active-duty soldiers. Dr. Session said that the study he referenced for the suicide rates did not attempt to explain why the National Guard rate is higher.

Representative Bratcher spoke about some of the challenges of serving in the National Guard.

Senator Boswell requested data on veteran suicide as compared to the general population, and asked about the federal government's role in suicide prevention. Mr. Renaud praised the efforts by the federal government to address veteran suicide, but emphasized the need for state level programs and organizations.

Brigadier General (Ret.) Steve Bullard, Executive Director of the Kentucky Commission on Military Affairs, joined the testimony table. General Bullard said that the sudden shift from combat back to civilian life can be particularly challenging for members of the National Guard, who are often expected to return to their daily lives immediately.

Responding to a question from Senator Deneen, Mr. Renaud said that while KDVA cannot tell veteran care clinics how to operate, they communicate with the clinics to better understand how to improve the care process.

Responding to a question from Representative Stalker, Mr. Renaud said that members of the National Guard often have a more difficult time reintegrating after returning from a mission, as they can miss out on reintegration programs available to other servicemembers. Dr. Session emphasized the importance of federal reintegration efforts for returning soldiers.

Responding to a question from Senator Berg, Dr. Session spoke about the healthcare coverage available to veterans who retire as compared to veterans who exit the military without retiring.

USA Cares

Matt Castor, Vice President of Government and Corporate Relations for USA Cares, and Bill Dieruf, Board Member of USA Cares, delivered a presentation on their organization's work. USA Cares works with veterans and their families to mitigate factors that contribute to suicide. They help veterans with rent, car payments, employment, education, and other issues.

Responding to a question from Representative Bojanowski, Mr. Castor said that USA Cares employs a team of case managers who assess each veteran's situation.

Representative Raymer praised the work of USA Cares.

Senator Harper Angel said that it would be helpful to know USA Cares' budget request as the biannual budget is crafted during the next legislative session.

Representative Johnson praised the work of USA Cares.

Responding to a question from Representative Tackett Laferty, Mr. Dieruf said that Kentucky does not have a tax exemption for veterans' primary residence.

Responding to questions from Representative Stalker, Mr. Castor provided an overview of USA Cares' process for assisting veterans and the organization's budgetary needs.

Project Diehard

Brian Gibson, Founder and President of Project Diehard, discussed his organization's work on behalf of veterans. He covered some of the statistics surrounding veteran suicide and shared his personal story. Projected Diehard has begun construction of Forward Operating Base Rush, located in Illinois, to use as an installation to house veterans and help them rest and recover. They also have plans to construct an additional installation in Kentucky, called Fort Hope.

Disabled American Veterans

Michael Stoyonovich of Disabled American Veterans (Department of Kentucky), and Larry Arnett, Legislative Liaison for the Joint Executive Council of Veterans Organizations, discussed efforts to prevent veteran suicide. Mr. Stoyonovich explained a piece of model legislation that he drafted and hopes to see passed in the 2024 Regular Session.

Representative Stevenson emphasized the importance of following through on legislation to support veterans.

Check A Vet

Michael Carmichael, Founder, President, and Chief Executive Officer of Check A Vet, delivered a presentation on his organization's work to prevent veteran suicide. He covered demographic statistics on veteran suicide and shared videos produced by Check A Vet. Mr. Carmichael shared his call to action, which includes education, attention, and a team-based approach to suicide prevention.

Responding to a question from Representative Tackett Laferty, Mr. Carmichael said that Check A Vet works with local veterans' service organizations.

The committee took no action on the referred Administrative Regulation, 017 KAR 003:020.

With no further business before the committee, the meeting adjourned at 1:20 PM. The next meeting of the Interim Joint Committee on Veterans, Military Affairs, and Public Protection is scheduled for Tuesday, July 25, 2023, at 11:00 AM.