

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

## **Minutes of the 1st Meeting of the 2025 Interim**

**June 25, 2025**

### **Call to Order and Roll Call**

The Interim Joint Committee on Veterans, Military Affairs, and Public Protection held its first meeting on June 25, 2025, at 11:00 AM in Room 154 of the Capitol Annex. Senator Matthew Deneen, Chair, called the meeting to order, and the secretary called the roll.

### **Present were:**

Members: Senator Matthew Deneen, Co-Chair; Senators Karen Berg, Aaron Reed, Craig Richardson, Brandon Smith, and David Yates; and Representatives John Blanton, Steve Bratcher, Myron Dossett, Chris Freeland, Chris Fugate, Jim Gooch Jr., Mark Hart, DJ Johnson, Savannah Maddox, Candy Massaroni, Adam Moore, Marianne Proctor, T.J. Roberts, Scott Sharp, Pamela Stevenson, Ashley Tackett Laferty, Walker Thomas, and Bill Wesley.

Guests: Joe Masterson, Distinguished Veteran; Mark Bowman, Executive Director, Office of Kentucky Veterans Centers, Kentucky Department of Veterans Affairs (KDVA); Holly M. Johnson, Secretary, Finance and Administration Cabinet; Scott Baker, Executive Director, Division of Engineering and Contract Administration/Division of Facility Efficiency, Finance and Administration Cabinet; Juan Renaud, Deputy Commissioner, KDVA; Matt Castor, President and Chief Executive Officer, USA Cares; Angela Chattoo, Programs Project Manager, USA Cares; Bill Dieruf, former Mayor of Jeffersontown, Board Member, USA Cares; and Representative Peyton Griffiee.

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

### **Announcement**

Representative Moore announced that the Veterans Caucus will convene today, at the conclusion of the Veterans, Military Affairs, and Public Protection (VMAPP) meeting, in Room 125 of the Capitol Annex.

### **Distinguished Veteran**

Sponsored by Representative Massaroni and Senator Higdon, Joe Masterson of Bardstown was recognized as a Distinguished Veteran. Mr. Masterson is a longtime supporter of veterans in the Nelson County community. He has served as Post Commander for American Legion Post 121, sits on the board of the Bardstown-Nelson County Veterans Park, and is a

member of the military museum and Civil War museum in Bardstown.

Mr. Masterson thanked his family, Representative Massaroni, Senator Higdon, and the VMAPP Committee, and praised the VA clinics for their service to veterans.

Senator Berg thanked Mr. Masterson for his praise of the VA clinics and expressed concerns regarding federal cost-cutting initiatives.

### **Consideration of Referred Administrative Regulations**

No action was taken on the referred administrative regulation, 017 KAR 001:030 - Proposed - Nurse Loan Repayment Program.

### **KDVA Veterans Center and HVAC Issues**

Mark Bowman, Executive Director, Office of Kentucky Veterans Centers, Kentucky Department of Veterans Affairs (KDVA); Holly M. Johnson, Secretary, Finance and Administration Cabinet; Scott Baker, Executive Director, Division of Engineering and Contract Administration/Division of Facility Efficiency, Finance and Administration Cabinet; and Juan Renaud, Deputy Commissioner, KDVA, discussed the heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) system replacement project at the Carl M. Brashear Veterans Home in Radcliff, KY, and staffing trends at the state veteran centers. Mr. Baker provided an overview of the Radcliff HVAC replacement project, including the identification of problems with the old system, the replacement design process, budget request, and bidding process. Mr. Baker said the target completion date for the replacement project is January 2026.

Responding to Chair Deneen, Mr. Baker and Ms. Johnson said the severity of the problems with the old HVAC system first became apparent in 2020. While a similar system (which is still working) was installed at a veterans center in Glasgow around the same time, a different manufacturer installed the system in Radcliff. The system in Radcliff continued to operate, with frequent repairs and replacements of various parts, before it was determined that the entire system would need to be replaced. In February 2024, the replacement design process began. This process was completed in February 2025, and the project bid documents were posted. Chair Deneen expressed concern about the sense of urgency for the project.

Responding to Representative Bratcher, Mr. Baker said by 2020, all of the warranties for the original HVAC system were expiring. Mr. Baker estimated phase one of the replacement project, at a cost of \$6 million, will be completed in January 2026. Phase two of the project, at a cost of \$3 million, will bring the Radcliff facility to 100 percent capacity, and should be complete by March 2027. The full \$9 million has been appropriated to KDVA, and KDVA is holding the \$3 million for phase two until the bidding for that phase is complete.

Responding to Representative Sharp, Mr. Baker said the time between awareness of significant issues with the old HVAC system in 2020 and the determination that the entire system would need to be replaced in 2023, was spent replacing and repairing various parts to keep the system running. Mr. Baker highlighted the primary difference between the Glasgow and Radcliff systems: the manufacturer of the Glasgow system is considered a world-class HVAC manufacturer, and the Radcliff manufacturer (Samsung) is no longer making this particular HVAC system. Mr. Bowman estimated the Radcliff facility has been at roughly 50 percent occupancy since December 2022. Representative Sharp said this timeline is unacceptable, and requested that similar issues in the future be brought to the VMAPP committee to see if the timeline could be expedited.

Representative Roberts discussed occupancy rates in veterans centers in neighboring states and asked what may be contributing to Kentucky's lower occupancy rates. Mr. Bowman discussed various issues, including the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on nursing staff and the efforts to increase staff pay to attract more nurses to Kentucky's veterans centers. He said KDVA is always conversing with other states to determine best practices, and noted Kentucky is seeing veterans come into nursing facilities later, and often sicker, with more comorbidities. Once Kentucky's facilities became Medicaid certified in 2014, many veterans chose to receive care in other facilities, often closer to their homes, which may be contributing to lower occupancy rates in recent years.

Responding to Representative Massaroni, Mr. Baker said he would send information to committee members regarding who the commissioning agent was on the old project, and who the commissioning agent is for the new HVAC replacement project.

Responding to Representative Blanton, Mr. Bowman discussed ongoing conversations relating to the potential privatization of rooms in certain veterans centers. Mr. Baker said he would provide the committee with information on the manufacturer of the HVAC replacement.

Responding to Representative Moore, Mr. Bowman discussed the balance of nursing hours at each facility, weighed against the quality of care that can be provided.

Representative Stevenson encouraged KDVA to request everything they need going forward in the upcoming budget session.

Chair Deneen urged the presenters to request a longer warranty for the new HVAC system, extending beyond the one year warranty provided by the manufacturer of the old system.

## **USA Cares**

Matt Castor, President and Chief Executive Officer, USA Cares; Angela Chattoo, Programs

Project Manager, USA Cares; and Bill Dieruf, former Mayor of Jeffersontown, Board Member, USA Cares, discussed USA Cares work over the last year. Mr. Castor detailed the history of USA Cares, the factors that often contribute to veteran suicide, the sources of referral to USA Cares, and the services the organization has provided with the \$1 million appropriation received from the General Assembly in 2024.

Representative Bratcher thanked USA Cares for their support of the National Guard members who lost their homes in the recent flooding.

Responding to Representative Proctor, Mr. Castor discussed their programs for financial literacy, resume building, and interviewing skills for veterans.

Senator Berg thanked USA Cares for their work and asked about homeless veteran outreach. Mr. Castor and Mr. Dieruf emphasized the importance of USA Cares' work to prevent veteran homelessness, and discussed their ability to put homeless veterans in contact with other governmental and nonprofit organizations that focus specifically on veteran homelessness.

Representative Moore thanked USA Cares and asked about support for spouses of veterans who die while receiving support from the organization. Ms. Chattoo said USA Cares provides support to widows of veterans.

Representative Thomas praised USA Cares and asked about assistance for Tennessee veterans, as Fort Campbell borders both Kentucky and Tennessee. Mr. Castor said Fort Campbell presents a unique challenge, as it straddles the Kentucky-Tennessee line, and said anything the legislature could do to encourage similar support from Tennessee would be appreciated.

Senator Yates thanked USA Cares for their education efforts, particularly relating to avoiding claim sharks and other bad actors in the area of veteran support.

Chair Deneen congratulated Mr. Castor and said he is very pleased with USA Cares' handling of the funds appropriated by the General Assembly in 2024.

### **Military Vehicle Taxes**

Representative Peyton Griffie discussed 2025 Regular Session HB 113, his military vehicle tax exemption bill, which he plans to re-file in the upcoming session. There is a six percent tax on motor vehicle usage in Kentucky. The bill would add service members and retirees who purchase a vehicle on active orders to the list of exemptions. Representative Griffie expressed interest in including National Guard members and reservists in this exemption. He said the bill will be important to recruit and retain people in Kentucky.

Responding to Senator Yates, Representative Griffie said the bill is intended for personal vehicles, and it is important exemptions are not misused by small car dealers.

Senators Richardson and Reed expressed support for the measure.

Chair Deneen expressed support for the measure and emphasized the cost saving potential for service members and their families.

### **Adjournment**

With no further business, the meeting adjourned at 12:45 PM.