

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

Minutes of the 4th Meeting of the 2025 Interim

September 24, 2025

Call to Order and Roll Call

The fourth meeting of the Interim Joint Committee on Veterans, Military Affairs, and Public Protection was held on September 24, 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; Representative Bobby McCool, Co-Chair; Senators Karen Berg, Gary Boswell, Jimmy Higdon, Matt Nunn, Aaron Reed, Craig Richardson, Brandon Smith, Lindsey Tichenor, and Mike Wilson; and Representatives John Blanton, Steve Bratcher, Myron Dossett, Jim Gooch Jr., Mark Hart, DJ Johnson, Scott Lewis, Savannah Maddox, Candy Massaroni, Adam Moore, Marianne Proctor, Scott Sharp, Ashley Tackett Laferty, Walker Thomas, and Bill Wesley.

Guests: Eric Gibson, Director, Kentucky Emergency Management; Brigadier General (Ret.) Charles T. Jones, Executive Director, Department of Military Affairs; Doug Hargreaves, Urban Search and Rescue Coordinator; Corey Ann Jackson, Legislative Liaison and Policy Specialist, Department of Military Affairs; John May, Chief, Wolfe County Search and Rescue (WCSAR); Kevin Osbourn, Public Information Officer, WCSAR; Brigadier General (Ret.) Steven P. Bullard, Executive Director, Kentucky Commission on Military Affairs; and Colonel (Ret.) Lance A. O'Bryan, President/Chief Executive Officer, Knox Regional Development Alliance (KRDA).

LRC Staff: Jessica Zeh, Chris Jacovitch, and Logan Schaaf.

Approval of August 27, 2025 Minutes

The minutes of the August, 27, 2025, meeting were approved by voice vote without objection.

Introduction of New Member

Chair Deneen welcomed the newest committee member, Representative Ryan Dotson.

Recognition of Missing in America Veterans

Senator Richardson recognized the Missing in America Project, a nonprofit organization dedicated to locating, identifying, and interring the unclaimed remains of America's veterans. He read the names of the Missing in America veterans interred in Kentucky's veteran cemeteries.

Urban Search and Rescue Update

Eric Gibson, Director, Kentucky Emergency Management; Brigadier General (Ret.) Charles T. Jones, Executive Director, Department of Military Affairs; Doug Hargreaves, Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) Coordinator; and Corey Ann Jackson, Legislative Liaison and Policy Specialist, Department of Military Affairs, provided an overview of the USAR program's operations, staffing, and budget. USAR consists of KY-Task Force 1 (three 70 member teams), KY-Task Force 2 (three 22 member teams), Helicopter Aquatic Rescue Team, Incident Support Team, and a \$500,000 Rescue Aid Fund. Director Gibson said Task Forces 1 and 2 will be deployable by June 2026, and the Incident Support Team will be operational by April 2026.

Responding to Senator Berg, Director Gibson and Mr. Hargreaves said the goal will be to arrive on the scene of an unplanned incident within two hours plus driving time. For large storms and other events known ahead of time, USAR teams will be positioned near the projected impact areas.

Responding to Representative Bratcher, Director Gibson said USAR will include a K-9 element, with rescue dogs and trained handlers.

Responding to Senator Boswell, Director Gibson discussed the USAR program's costs.

Chair Deneen, Representative Hart, and Representative Blanton praised USAR and its stewardship of the funds allocated by the General Assembly in 2024.

Responding to Representative Blanton, General Jones said emergency rescue personnel are not eligible for line of duty death benefits, but USAR would support efforts in the 2026 Regular Session to make them eligible.

Rescue Squad Funding

John May, Chief, WCSAR, and Kevin Osbourn, Public Information Officer, WCSAR, discussed WCSAR's rescue operations in the Red River Gorge, mutual aid agreements with other counties, and assistance to state police and Kentucky Emergency Management. Challenges include inadequate funding, no space for equipment storage and training, retention and recruiting challenges, and the lack of death benefits.

Responding to Senator Smith, Chief May said WCSAR applies annually for a state search

and rescue grant. He discussed other grants they have applied for.

Responding to Co-Chair McCool, Chief May discussed communication challenges in poor signal areas within Red River Gorge.

Representative Blanton praised WCSAR and expressed interest in making search and rescue personnel eligible for death benefits.

Responding to Representative Moore, Chief May said state law prohibits search and rescue teams from charging for rescues. He discussed other potential avenues for fundraising.

Representative Tackett Laferty thanked Chief May and Mr. Osbourn and emphasized the important role of volunteers for search and rescue operations.

Responding to Senator Boswell, Chief May said people do not need to pay to explore the Red River Gorge. Senator Boswell said he would support charging for admittance.

Responding to Chair Deneen, Chief May discussed the use of drones and helicopters to find people in need of rescue. The thick canopy in the Red River Gorge can inhibit the use of infrared technology to locate people.

Kentucky Commission on Military Affairs

Brigadier General (Ret.) Steven P. Bullard, Executive Director, Kentucky Commission on Military Affairs, and Colonel (Ret.) Lance A. O'Bryan, President/Chief Executive Officer, KRDA, provided an overview of the state's military community. They highlighted military installations, top defense contractors, recent legislative successes, and future legislative priorities. Colonel O'Bryan discussed KRDA's priorities for the Fort Knox region, including the preservation and expansion of Fort Knox's mission, the attraction of new businesses to the region, and the improvement of quality of life for soldiers at Fort Knox.

Responding to Representative Wesley, General Bullard discussed potential future operations for Blue Grass Army Depot.

Responding to Senator Higdon, General Bullard discussed the potential economic impact of a military retirement tax exemption.

Responding to Representative Gooch, General Bullard highlighted arguments in favor of a military retirement tax exemption.

Responding to Representative Bratcher, General Bullard and Colonel O'Bryan discussed issues relating to vehicle taxes for active duty servicemembers, particularly those who are

transferred back to the United States from overseas.

Responding to Representative Massaroni, General Bullard discussed issues relating to the Basic Allowance for Housing, a program providing a tax-free allowance to help servicemembers pay for housing when government quarters are not available.

Adjournment

With no further business before the committee, the meeting was adjourned at 12:47 PM.