

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

Minutes of the Fourth Meeting of the 2026 Interim

September 16, 2026

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 16, 2026, at 11:00 AM ET/10:00 AM CT in Room 154 of the Capitol Annex. Representative Bobby McCool, Chair, called the meeting to order, and the secretary called the roll.

Present were:

Members: Representative Bobby McCool, Co-Chair; Senator Matthew Deneen, Co-Chair; Senators Karen Berg, Matt Nunn, Aaron Reed, Brandon Smith, Lindsey Tichenor, and Mike Wilson; and Representatives Chad Aull, John Blanton, Steve Bratcher, Adrielle Camuel, Myron Dossett, Chris Freeland, Chris Fugate, Jim Gooch Jr., Mark Hart, DJ Johnson, Candy Massaroni, Adam Moore, Marianne Proctor, T.J. Roberts, Scott Sharp, Walker Thomas, and Bill Wesley.

Guests: Shannon Stiglitz, Consultant, Kentucky Science and Technology Corporation (KSTC); Nicki Stewart, Workforce Development Manager, Veterans Accelerated Licensure Occupational Recruitment (VALOR); Bryan Nichols, Veteran, Ford Motor Company; Matt Castor, President and Chief Executive Officer, USA Cares; Jim Lock, Vice President of Government and Corporate Relations, USA Cares; Angela Chattoo, Director of Programs, USA Cares; Heidi Cooley-Cook, Deputy Director, Kentucky Autism Training Center; John Holder, Chair, Kentucky Board of Emergency Medical Services (KBEMS); Eddie Slone, Executive Director, KBEMS; Wayne Briscoe, Deputy Executive Director of Administration, KBEMS; Amy Scarborough, Vice President of Public Affairs, Eastern Kentucky University (EKU); Dr. Rae Loftis, Associate Vice President and Chief Student Affairs Officer, EKU; and Dr. Joshua Maynard, Interim Director, Military and Veterans Affairs, EKU.

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

Approval of August Meeting Minutes

A motion was made by Representative Massaroni and seconded by Co-Chair Deneen to approve the minutes of the August 19, 2026, meeting. Minutes were approved by voice vote without objection.

Kentucky VALOR Program Update

Shannon Stiglitz, Consultant, Kentucky Science and Technology Corporation (KSTC); Nicki Stewart, VALOR (Veterans Accelerated Licensure Occupational Recruitment) Workforce Development Manager; and Bryan Nichols, Veteran, Ford Motor Company, provided an update on the VALOR program, an initiative of the KSTC, first funded by the General Assembly in 2022 to attract service members and their families to Kentucky and pair them with jobs. They discussed the VALOR model, highlighting recruitment, case management, and connections with employers.

Mr. Nichols discussed how VALOR helped connect him with Ford Motor Company after his retirement from the military.

Responding to Senator Nunn, Ms. Stewart discussed recruitment challenges, including taxes on military pensions.

Responding to Co-Chair Deneen, Ms. Stewart highlighted VALOR's work with educational institutions, and emphasized the importance of building in enough time ahead of a veteran's retirement to best pair them with employers.

Responding to Representative Moore, Ms. Stewart discussed working with active-duty National Guard members.

Responding to Representative Sharp, Mr. Nichols highlighted the factors that persuaded him to retire in Kentucky, including low cost of living, competitive wages, and the beauty of the state.

USA Cares Update

Matt Castor, President and Chief Executive Officer, USA Cares; Jim Lock, Vice President of Government and Corporate Relations, USA Cares; and Angela Chattoo, Director of Programs, USA Cares, detailed the history of the organization, the factors that often contribute to veteran suicide, the sources of referral to USA Cares, the services the organization provided with the \$1 million appropriation received from the General Assembly in 2024, and the impacts of funding cuts in the 2026 Kentucky budget.

USA Cares is requesting \$2,826,000 from the General Assembly for FY 2029-2030.

Representative Massaroni praised USA Cares and said she would like to see some of the funds appropriated by the General Assembly to the Kentucky Department of Veterans Affairs (KDVA) redirected to USA Cares.

Responding to Representative Bratcher, Mr. Lock clarified that referrals listed under “veterans affairs” came to USA Cares from the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, not the KDVA.

Responding to Representative Moore, Ms. Chattoo discussed economic and mental health issues faced by at-risk veterans.

Senator Berg stated the General Assembly funding cut to USA Cares in 2026 was a mistake.

Senator Nunn said he would look into the process by which USA Cares lost their line-item budget appropriation in 2026.

Responding to Senator Smith, Mr. Castor said USA Cares plans to add a legal program to their operations once they have the funding.

Co-Chair Deneen praised USA Cares’ diligence and their stewardship over public funds.

Kentucky Autism Training Center

Heidi Cooley-Cook, Deputy Director, Kentucky Autism Training Center, discussed autism and public safety, emphasizing the importance of training for first responders, family support, and community partnerships. She stated public safety risks for autistic Kentuckians often center around wandering, including into traffic and bodies of water. Law enforcement training helps create smooth interactions between people with autism and the responding agency.

The Autism Training Center conducts training for first responders and distributes materials and supplies statewide, including for the Yellow Dot Program, which is a free safety initiative that alerts first responders at crash scenes of critical medical information.

Kentucky Board of EMS

John Holder, Chair, Kentucky Board of Emergency Medical Services (KBEMS); Eddie Slone, Executive Director, KBEMS; and Wayne Briscoe, Deputy Executive Director of Administration, KBEMS, discussed two new KBEMS initiatives, specifically reform of the complaint investigation process and the removal of policies that cause agencies to lose grants they have already been awarded.

Responding to Co-Chair Deneen, Mr. Holder discussed interstate EMS licensure compacts.

Responding to Representative Hart, Mr. Briscoe discussed potential legislation for the 2027 Regular Session to address the earlier discussed reforms.

EKU Ranked No. 1 for Military Friendly Schools

Amy Scarborough, Vice President of Public Affairs, Eastern Kentucky University (EKU); Dr. Rae Loftis, Associate Vice President and Chief Student Affairs Officer, EKU; and Dr. Joshua Maynard, Interim Director, Military and Veterans Affairs, EKU, discussed EKU's military community.

EKU was recently ranked first in the United States for both military friendliness and military spouse friendliness by Military Friendly, a ratings agency that measures the commitment, effort, and success of colleges and companies in creating sustainable and meaningful opportunities for veterans and active-duty servicemembers and their families.

EKU plans to simplify the VA benefits process for their students, expand military training credits, and strengthen partnerships with military installations.

Representative Sharp and Chair McCool praised EKU's veteran programs and outreach.

Co-Chair Deneen presented EKU with a committee challenge coin.

Adjournment

With no further business to come before the committee, the meeting adjourned.