

IOWA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
The Regular Quarterly Meeting of the Iowa Commission of Veterans Affairs Meeting
Wednesday, April 7, 2021 - 10:00 a.m.
Conference Call via Google Meets
7105 NW 70th Avenue
Johnston, Iowa 50313-1824

Present: Elizabeth Ledvina, Chairperson
Carol Whitmore, Member, Commission of Veterans Affairs

Via Google Meets: Orene Cressler, Member, Commission of Veterans Affairs
Kenneth Lloyd, Member, Commission of Veterans Affairs
Darlene McMartin, Member, Commission of Veterans Affairs
George Mosby, Member, Commission of Veterans Affairs
Gregory Paulline, Member, Commission of Veterans Affairs
Mary Van Horn, Member, Commission of Veterans Affairs
Gary Wattnem, Member, Commission of Veterans Affairs
Nancy Morford, Administrative Assistant, Iowa Veterans Home – Meeting Secretary
Laurel Degelau, Executive Secretary, Iowa Veterans Home

Absent: Steve Hyde, Member, Commission of Veterans Affairs

Staff: Timon M. Oujiri, Commandant, Iowa Veterans Home
Steven Lukan, Executive Director, Iowa Department of Veterans Affairs
Karl Lettow, Communications, Iowa Department of Veterans Affairs

Guests/
Presenters: Wayne Marek, Des Moines Vet Center, Des Moines, Iowa
Bruce Beeston, Vietnam Veterans of America
James Miller, Audubon County VSO

Via Google Meets: Kristi Catrenich, VBA, Des Moines Regional Office
Ron Sacket, Acting Director, Des Moines Regional Office
John Derner, The American Legion
Brett McLain, Director, Story County VSO
Gail Graham, Director, VA Central Iowa Healthcare System, Des Moines
Mike Mortensen, President, IACCVSO
Judy Johnson, Director, VA Medical Center, Iowa City

NOTE: THESE MINUTES ARE 'UNAPPROVED' UNTIL ACCEPTED BY THE COMMISSION AT THE NEXT MEETING.

APPROVED: Elizabeth Ledvina Date: 7-7-21
Elizabeth Ledvina, Chair, Iowa Commission of Veterans Affairs

Call to Order:

Meeting Chairwoman Ledvina called the meeting to order at 10:03 a.m.

Pledge of Allegiance/Moment of Silence:

Pledge of Allegiance was led by Chairperson Ledvina followed by a moment of silence for our departed veterans, POWs, those missing in action (MIAs) and those on active duty at this time.

Roll Call:

Chairperson Ledvina took roll call. Commissioner Hyde was excused.

Welcome/Introduction of Guests:

Chairperson Ledvina welcomed everyone in attendance, in person and through Google Meets. A round table of introductions of guests was held.

VA Regional Office Update:

Ron Sacket, Acting Director of the VA Regional Office, reported he is here in place of Bruce Voigt, who has been detailed as the Director of DRE Service in Washington D.C. for a few months.

Announced the Regional Office has reopened public patient operations and seeing veterans in person for several months. Have been conducting some in-person hearings.

There are some new leaders in the Veterans Benefits Administration, Acting Under Secretary for Benefits is Tom Murphy. Mr. Mike Frueh is the new Principle Deputy Under Secretary for Benefits.

On January 1 the National Defense Authorization Act passed into law and added three new presumptive Agent Orange conditions, bladder cancer, hypothyroidism and Parkinson-like symptoms. Waiting on guidance for implementation, but veterans may start filing claims now.

For C & P examinations, in-person medical exams were suspended for 28 days. They have resumed and are up and running at pre-pandemic full capacity levels.

E-benefits is migrating to va.gov. This migration began in 2017 and most features have been moved. The final features will be transitioned by the end of April.

Mr. Sacket has a flyer and a fact sheet to bring more attention to pension poaching, a financial scam targeting veterans, survivors and their families who are potentially

eligible for VA benefits. If you are aware of anyone being scammed, you can call the VA at 1-800-827-1000 or contact the IG at va.gov/oig.

VA Medical Center – Iowa City Update:

Judy Johnson, Director, VA Medical Center, Iowa City, gave an update on COVID vaccinations. They have 1,775 staff fully vaccinated out of 1,800 staff. Since December 28, 2020, they have given 21,632 vaccinations using Moderna. They are continuing to get out in the community to get everyone vaccinated.

Recently they have received the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, which is a one-shot dose. Johnson & Johnson vaccination clinics are being held in Waterloo today until 7 p.m.; Saturday, April 10, from 9 a.m. – 3:30 p.m. in the Davenport Clinic; and on Saturday, April 17 in Dubuque CBOC. We are vaccinating those who are eligible under the Save Lives Act—veterans, spouses, Cat. A, etc. We have vaccinated 95 individuals who are enrolled in VA care. This past Saturday we vaccinated almost 900 veterans when they were entering the hospital.

Our new Burlington Clinic is not a full-fledged CBOC so services will be limited. Offering lab, primary care, mental health. We are working on filling those positions. That clinic will open in late May or June.

We are conducting a site selection for our new Waterloo Clinic and should have that awarded in September so opening date is expected in October 2022.

Regarding the impact of coronavirus on our healthcare system, we are still seeing positive rates in our catchment areas, including some new variances. We will be receiving sequencing lab equipment for detecting the variance. We hope to have it operational by the end of the month. It will not change the course of treatments for our COVID patients, but it will make us much more aware. As of today, our census has 3 positive COVID patients and zero employees who are COVID positive.

VA Central Iowa Health Care – Des Moines Update:

Gail Graham, Director of Des Moines VA Central Iowa Healthcare System, stated they are still screening visitors requiring people to have appointments to be on site. They have an electronic mobile app to do the screening by texting “screen” to 53079. Then show the response to the screeners at the doors. Visitation policy has not changed. Hoping we can open up for visitors soon, but depends on the COVID positivity rate in the community. We are still admitting to the COC and to the domiciliary. We do screening and then quarantine for a period of time.

We have given approximately 20,000 doses of vaccine. We have both Moderna and Johnson & Johnson. We have been asked to give vaccinations to about 100 employees of the Department of Homeland Security, which have been scheduled over the next couple of weeks. We hold daily vaccine clinics in the lobby of our main facility and

continue to hold weekend clinics and one-day a week vaccine clinics in each of our five outpatient clinics.

We also started vaccinating spouses under the Saves Lives Act and reaching out to those veterans who previously were not eligible for health care and offering the vaccine. Have had a good response.

About one year ago we were part of a market assessment that was required under legislation to look at whether we have our clinics in the right locations, are there other collaborations we should look at. As part of that effort, we hosted a listening session last week and it covered both Iowa and Nebraska. Our VISN Director Mr. McDivitt conducted those listening sessions. Veterans, service representatives and others were asked to give their input on what VA should look like in the future. There will be more listening sessions over the next year. A report with recommendations on our individual markets will be given by January 2022.

Our new Secretary has delayed the further deployment of our electronic health record, asking for a 12 week review of the installation.

Still taking applications for the expansion of the Family Caregiver Program. These are for veterans who are 70% or higher service connected and served on or after September 11, 2001, or before May 7, 1975. The veteran must have been discharged from the military or have a date of medical discharge.

Daily vaccination clinics are every day from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. with appointments and also take walk-ins.

Will be doing a Johnson & Johnson vaccine clinic on April 10. Using a new functionality called vet text. We will send a veteran a text asking if they are interested in getting vaccinated.

We have a mobile food pantry scheduled for April 13 from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. located across from the River Place in Des Moines, where the old off-site parking used to be.

Saturday, April 24 we will hold a Moderna vaccine clinic.

Construction updates: The Community Living Center cottage to the north and west of the Community Living Center is a 12-bed cottage. We are moving our dementia patients there and it is scheduled to open in June 2021.

We are expanding our warehouse to hold the increased number of personal protective items we need to keep on hand.

A primary care annex is being built in the old Southridge parking lot in the former Toys-R-Us building. It is scheduled to open February 2022. We will move primary care in Des Moines to that new location. It will also have a lab and radiology services.

We are in the middle of construction for the new Mason City clinic, which is scheduled to open in fall of 2021.

A new clinic was awarded for Ft. Dodge which is scheduled to open in January 2022.

We are in the middle of remodeling the third floor of our domiciliary, including new bathrooms.

We are in the design phase of a new mental health building.

Commissioner Van Horn announced the terrain garden they have been putting up next to the CLC will be having a grand opening in late May or early June.

Iowa Department of Veterans Affairs Update:

Executive Director Steve Lukan briefed the Commission on IDVA.

A good number of IDVA staff have been vaccinated.

Continuing to do as much as we can over the phone and through fax and email. Operations at the cemetery have also been continuing.

For Memorial Day, we are planning a normal Memorial Day Program at the Veterans Cemetery, opening up the grounds and having as many people attend who want to, while still following safety guidelines.

There is some final paperwork through the federal government still to complete, but our new columbarium walls for urns is completed.

Iowa Veterans Home Update:

Commandant Oujiri presented the Iowa Veterans Home Update:

Timon announced that 93 percent of our residents and 65% of our staff have been vaccinated for COVID. National average for long-term care facilities recently was 74 percent for residents and 41 percent of staff. We are above both.

We have completed 33,283 COVID tests. There are 8 staff members currently off due to exposure to COVID and had two positive cases last week. Twenty-eight of our residents have had COVID losing five of those.

We are continuing to vaccinate staff and residents who change their mind and now want the vaccine.

Following CDC, CMS and Iowa Department of Public Health guidelines, residents can now have visitors in their rooms without being supervised. We have also started some

small group activities following guidelines. Small group dining is back as long as they stay six feet apart.

We have brought back 17 volunteers so far. They volunteered to be fully vaccinated and are assigned to specific buildings.

Renovation projects: Loftus renovation began in January so deconstruction is almost completed. Our Pharmacy and Respiratory Care will be located on the second floor of Loftus. Projected completion date is January 2022.

New boilers are up and running, with the project being 95 percent completed.

We are updating our IT system, putting in new wiring throughout the facility. This was a \$2 million project and should be completed sometime this summer.

We are admitting new residents. We are at 79 percent capacity now.

Timon read a thank you letter from a resident's family member thanking staff for the great care they took of him. Staff take great care of all of our residents.

Timon thanked everyone for all of their support during this last legislative session. He appreciated all of the support, phone calls, letters, etc., that came in.

In response to a question about whether visitors must be vaccinated, Timon responded no, we cannot require them to be vaccinated.

Approval of Minutes:

Commissioner Lloyd made a motion to approve Commission minutes of January 6, 2021. Second by Commissioner Paulline. Motion carried. Approved unanimously.

Commissioner Lloyd made a motion to approve Trust Fund conference call on January 7, 2021. Second by Commissioner Martin. Motion carried. Approved unanimously.

Commissioner Lloyd made a motion to approve Trust Fund conference call on February 4, 2021. Second by Commissioner Paulline. Motion carried. Approved unanimously.

Commissioner Lloyd made a motion to approve Trust Fund conference call on March 4, 2021. Second by Commissioner Paulline. Motion carried. Approved unanimously.

Old Business:

Chairwoman Ledvina gave an update on legislation. The bills that did not go forward included the Commandant's bill and smoking bill. Still waiting to hear about the investment of the trust fund, but do know it made it through the funnel.

Regarding making of the signage for the Medal of Honor Highway, it has been put on hold due to the problem at the prison per the DOT. As soon as we can, we will get the ceremony arranged and let everyone know.

New Business:

Spring School for the County Veterans Service Officers begins Monday – Friday, April 12 – 17. Half of the districts will attend on Monday/Tuesday, the other half will attend Thursday/Friday. All new people will attend on Wednesday.

Commissioner Van Horn attended a meeting of the Marine Corps League. They questioned why the Marine Corps League does not have a representative on the Commission. Chairwoman Ledvina will get information to Commissioner Van Horn who will forward to the Marine Corp League.

Next Commission Meeting:

The next quarterly meeting will be held at the Iowa Gold Star Military Museum at Camp Dodge on Wednesday, July 7, 2021, beginning at 10:00 a.m.

Adjournment:

The meeting adjourned at 10:58 a.m.

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