

Approved: 01/24/08

Date

MINUTES OF THE HOUSE VETERANS MILITARY AND HOMELAND SECURITY COMMITTEE

The meeting was called to order by Chairman Don Myers at 1:30 PM on January 22, 2008 in Room 784 of the Docking Building.

All members were present except:

Dan Johnson - excused
Kenny Wilk - excused
Bob Bethell - excused

Committee staff present:

Scott Wells, Revisor of Statutes Office
Athena Andaya, Kansas Legislative Research Department
Art Griggs, Revisor of Statutes Office
Jill Shelley, Kansas Legislative Research Department
Barbara Lewerenz, Committee Assistant

Conferees appearing before the committee:

Darrell Bencken, VFW, Veterans Claims Advisory Committee
David Warnken, American Legion, Veterans Claims Assistance Advisory Program Committee
Wayne Bollig, Kansas Veterans Claims Assistance Program Director

Others attending:

See attached list.

Chairman Myers reported that Dan Johnson hopes to report to the committee by February 8th. He had surgery and is dealing with an infection. Staff members were introduced and new staff members, Scott Wells, Jill Shelley and Barbara Lewerenz gave brief remarks.

Chairman Myers asked for any bill introductions by committee members. Vice Chairperson Candy Ruff submitted a clean up issue on the claims bills passed in the last session. Chairman Myers introduced a bill that would allow student participation in the funeral services of soldiers by playing taps. The student would be given a \$25 voucher for providing the service and absence from school would be excused. There were no objections.

Chairman Myers recognized Darrell Bencken, VFW, who presented a report on the Veterans Grant Program for the VFW. (Attachment 1)

Chairman Myers recognized David O. Warnken, American Legion, who reported on the the Veterans Claims Assistance Advisory Program . (Attachment 2)

Chairman Myers recognized Wayne Bollig, Director of the Veterans' Claims Assistance Program. Mr. Bollig presented an overview of the Veterans Claims Assistance Program and accounted for the \$500,000 appropriated by the legislature. (Attachment 3)

Discussion followed the presentations that clarified issues dealing with outreach in rural areas, scholarships for veterans who served in combat, outreach to prisoners who are veterans, training representatives to deal with those suffering from post-traumatic-stress disorder, and the time frame for claims processing. It was noted that the number of claims for Veteran's benefits has increased by 18 percent and are expected to rise. The programs are funded by a \$500,000 appropriation from the State and from service organizations contributing \$178,000 in cash, service and in-kind. Wichita is the main office through which all claims are finally processed. Service members receive care from the military as long as the member is considered active duty. At the time of discharge, the member is eligible for veterans programs. Compared to other states, Kansas has one of the most generous veterans assistance programs.

There were no further bill introductions. Chairman Myers adjourned the meeting at 2:55 PM.

The next meeting will be on January 23rd on the rail.

TESTIMONY BY DARRELL BENCKEN, VFW
BEFORE
HOUSE VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Chairman Myers, members of the committee, I'm Darrell Bencken, I represent the Kansas VFW on the Veterans Claims Advisory Committee. I'm happy to be here today to report on the progress of the Veterans Grant Program for the VFW.

We are now six months into the second year of operation of the program. For two years now you have entrusted the VFW with \$250,000.00 per year to assist Kansas veterans. I'm happy to report that claims have increased drastically.

We went from a decline in production under the KCVA to an 18% increase in the first year, resulting in increased production of over 8.8 million dollars in claims revenue to close the year at over 39.4 million dollars. With half of this year over, we are projecting a similar increase in claims volume to end at over 49 million dollars. A tremendous benefit to Kansas veterans and a compliment to combining state and veteran service organization resources to help veterans.

VFW Service Officers have filed hundreds of new claims resulting in first time disability compensation and getting veterans into the VA system. One on going claim resulted in a veteran receiving over \$48,000.00 in back compensation while another resulted in a settlement of over \$238,000.00. The grant program is working and working well.

In closing, I assure you the Kansas VFW strongly supports the grant program and would welcome participation by other veteran service organizations, but we would ask that you not compromise the high standards you have set for the program.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to testify here today and I now stand for any questions.

January 22, 2008

Testimony by David O. Warnken, member Veterans Claims Assistance Advisory Program Committee

To: The Veterans, Military Affairs, and Homeland Security Committee
Representative Don Meyers Chairman
Representative Mario Goico Vice Chairman
Representative L. Candy Ruff Ranking Minority Member.

Chairman Meyers and committee members thank you for allowing me this time on your busy agenda to present some of my observations and concerns as a member of the Veterans Claims Assistance Advisory Program Committee, sometimes referred to as VCAP. While I am the American Legion representative on this committee, I am also committed to work in total cooperation with the VFW and other veteran's service organizations that may someday become involved in the Grant Program. I am a life member of the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars. I have been involved with veteran's issues for many years serving as a member of the Kansas American Legion Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Committee and as Post Service Officer of my local post in Hutchinson.

I believe by and large, and in the spirit of co-operation, the program is running very well. Of course there have been a few bumps along the way; however rather than view such occurrences as detractions they have been viewed as opportunities to improve services to all Kansas veterans. I am proud of the American Legion's performance in the first year and half of the program's actual operation. This is a new program that has and will continue to prove itself as time goes along.

It is my sincere hope that since the American Legion and the VFW did not use all the funding allowed by the Legislature in the first year of the grant program that those funds will not be cut for the current year. Please keep in mind that through no fault of the American Legion or the VFW the contracts for the grant program were not signed until late August or September of 2006. Therefore neither the American Legion nor the VFW were in a position to begin hiring and training personnel to staff our offices in Kansas' three VA Medical Centers and thereby begin the grant program in earnest. I do want to thank the Legislature for its foresight in allowing funds not used in the program's first year to be rolled over into the second year. These funds have allowed the American Legion to upgrade and update computer and other office equipment which we hope will be completed in the very near future. The American Legion and VFW agreed to allow the Grant Committee to also use some of these funds to purchase resource booklets outlining basic VA benefits. It is my understanding that my Department Adjutant mailed each of you a copy of that booklet last fall and many of you have requested and received additional copies for distribution to nursing homes and other care centers. Thank you all for partnering with us in spreading the word about VA benefits.

Unfortunately, the funding that was allowed to rollover to the second year was not enough to fund the hiring of additional personnel to alleviate some of the backlog of claims. In fact some of our staff still work after hours and on weekends in order to meet VA imposed deadlines. Yes that is a hint we should have an increase in funding to hire at least one more Veterans Services Representative.

The American Legion has attended every reintegration program organized and conducted in Kansas. These reintegration programs provide an excellent opportunity to speak directly to veterans returning from active duty as well as their families, and have resulted in a number of new filings for VA benefits. The need for veterans services is going to increase and will not go away.

In summary I want to commend the Legislature for providing the grant program; it has provided the American Legion and the VFW an opportunity to seek out, and reach out to more veterans and their families to make certain every veteran receives their earned benefits and services. Thanks to the Grant Program, the American Legion has been able to increase the number of veterans we represent before the Department of Veterans Affairs and the benefits paid to those veterans. We have been better able to maximize the effectiveness of our entire Veteran's Affairs program.

I would like to mention something that happened last week in Mulvane.....two members of the Kansas National Guard were presented five hundred dollar grants from the "Coalition to Salute America's Heroes". This grant money is awarded to Global War on Terrorism veterans who have sustained 30% or greater disability from injuries. One recently returned from Walter Reed hospital where she had additional surgery in her struggle to recover. The other soldier returned more recently; besides his physical injuries he is suffering from a severe case of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, his family is trying to survive on \$1300.00 a month while he is caught between the military and the VA. He and his family are faced with mortgage payments and are struggling to keep the family together. The American Legion has filed for 100% disability for him, but the VA's process is slow, therefore private funds are being raised to help the family in the interim. But back to the two vets....one fairly well on her way to recovery, the other facing an up hill battle that has just begun. When the first veteran received her \$500.00 grant last Wednesday she immediately gave her check to the second more seriously injured veteran. This is a perfect example of veterans helping other veterans. This is why the American Legion was founded in 1919. We continue to make this our highest priority. With your help we can continue the work of helping other veterans.

Thank you.

Kansas Commission on Veterans' Affairs

Veterans' Claims Assistance Program

Report to the Committee on:
Veterans, Military and Homeland Security

By: Wayne Bollig
Veterans Claims Assistance Program Director

Chairman Myers, Representatives of the committee thank you for the opportunity to come before you and brief you on the VCAP program. Having completed the first year of operation we are now just over six months into the second year of operations for this program. While in its infancy, the Veterans' Claims Assistance Program has been, overall, a solid success. With the support of the Commission and working with the two participating veterans service organizations we were able to put in place a program that works better for veterans, and assists the KCVA in developing stronger partnerships with the service organizations.

- In State Fiscal Year 2007 –the Legislature appropriated - \$500,000 for the grant program.
- Nine service organizations were invited to participate
- Of the various Veteran Service Organizations that applied with a request to participate, only two met the constraints of KSA 73-1234 in year one.
- The two Veterans Service Organizations that completed a request to participate and agreed willingly to comply with all requirements of K.S.A. 73-1234 were:
 - The American Legion and
 - Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW).

Progress Year One July 1 2006 – June 30 2007

Significant areas of progress, to include:

- (1) Establishment of the Veterans Claims Assistance Program Advisory Board;
- (2) The Commission approved use of the proposed contracts.
- (3) Develop rules and regulations
- (4) Review and select Veterans Service Organizations eligible to participate;
- (5) Transition of staff and begin operation of the VCAP offices;
- (6) Purchased the Virtual Veterans Software Program;
- (7) Transfer equipment; and
- (7) Establish reporting procedures
- (8) Establish the KCVA Quality Assurance Program
- (9) All staff participating in the quality assurance program have been cross-accredited
- (10) Provided annual staff training.

I would like to recognize the Veterans Claims Assistance Program Advisory Board and thank them for the long hours and hard work in support of the program and of me a chair of the program. Each one of these individuals deserves credit for the programs rapid and strong success.

- Representative Candy Ruff –Vice Chair of the board
- Senator Ralph Ostmeyer - Secretary of the board,
- Wayne Bollig, Director of Veteran Services and the VCAP Board – Chair
- Darrell Bencken - VFW representative and
- David Warnken - American Legion representative.

House Committee on Veterans
Military and Homeland Security
01/22/08
Attachment 3

The recommendations of the Veterans Claims Assistance Program Advisory Board are taken to the KCVA Commission for approval. These recommendations are developed through the cooperative efforts of the participating Veterans Service Organizations members, the appointed legislators and the Chair. The Board believes in open discussions and have welcomed and received comments and recommendations from veterans that have attended meetings. The board members put in a lot of time to make this program a model of how a public/private program should work, encouraging the sharing of time money and resources to assist all veterans.

The Board advised and the KCVA Commission who allocated funds to the participating Veterans Service Organizations contract were signed and funds distributed within the first quarter of FY2007

- SFY2007- The Commission approved distribution of grant funds:
 - \$250,000 – to the AL and,
 - \$250,000 - to the VFW.

By October transition of staff and operations was made to the VCAP offices

Four staff members resigned from the KCVA and were hired by the VSOs as part of the Grant Program.

Grant recipient staffs consist of:

- American Legion – Four VSRs and two administrative staff.
- VFW – Four VSRs and two administrative staff.

Four KCVA staff members in the VARO remained in the Agency and were reassigned to the Quality Assurance Office under Veteran Services.

By legislative direction, KCVA was prohibited from hiring new staff personnel in Leavenworth and Topeka.

As part of the VCAP a quality assurance program was implemented with all claims being reviewed prior to submission to the VA all claims by grant participants flow through the QA office. This process has helped in the timely submission of substantially complete claims.

All VSRs participating in the program now carry multiple accreditations allowing any veteran using the VCAP program to follow his claim from any participating grant office including the 14 KCVA field offices across the state.

- Because of the late start in the program last yeas there was a \$81,065 carry over so in SFY2008 - The Commission approved distribution of grant funds:
 - \$250,000 - to the AL plus re-appropriated, unexpended SFY 2007 funds of \$40,532
 - \$250,000 - to the VFW plus re-appropriated, unexpended SFY 2007 funds of \$40,532

Numbers

Participating service organizations developed and reviewed over 10,200 claims from July 2006 through June 2007. * For the first quarter of this time, permanent and temporary staff employed by the KCVA provided support in these service center locations. Support included training new VSO personnel and doubling up on claims work.

II. For 2005 and 2006 while under the KCVA production in service organization offices in the hospital, increased by 6% growing from \$79 Million to \$83 million. VCAP Offices operating 3 months under the KCVA and approximately nine months under the grant program showed an 18% increase in production in SFY 2007 with combined production of over \$96 million. We are currently projecting a further increase of 21% for SFY 2008 to \$122 million. If this goal is attained it would mean a total increase since the inception of the grant program of approximately \$40 million dollars paid directly to veterans, survivors and dependents.

Expenses

- In addition to service grant funds, the KCVA purchased the Virtual Veteran Software package for use by participating Veterans Service Organizations and the KCVA.
- The Commission also agreed to allow the participating Veterans Service Organizations to keep all state supplies and equipment to include new computers.
- The KCVA provided funds and staffing through September 15, 2006 and continues to retain staff in the Wichita RO and the Topeka VFW office as part of the transition to the One-Stop offices and the implementation of the Quality Assurance program.

With total Grant fund expenditures for SFY2007 of \$418,935 in grant payments to the American Legion and VFW and \$222,218 from the Veteran Services program in support of VCAP, expenditures in the VCAP program total \$641,153 for SFY 2007. This equals roughly \$150 in returned veterans' benefits for every state dollar spent. In addition, service organizations reflected \$178,787 in match for state dollars expended.

IV. Goals for the SFY2008

Outreach

Goal

Develop a coordinated outreach effort of the VCAP, including the KCVA field offices, and VSO post service officers reach more veterans and assisting them in claims filing.

Implementation Steps

1. Build upon efforts involving all Veterans Service Organizations, other existing working groups, finding common objectives.
2. Engage all Veterans Service Organizations to identify and coordinate their roles in support of veterans their spouses, widows and dependents.
3. Develop a self-assessment tool to assist the Veterans Service Organizations and other entities in determining their capacity to assist veterans.

Training

Goal

Provide coordinated, consistent, standardized training to all veteran service representatives.

Implementation Steps

1. Establish a requirement for annual training with certification by the KCVA for all veteran service representatives.