

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA) VETERANS' ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON REHABILITATION (VACOR)

COMMITTEE MINUTES

August 2 - 3, 2023

Hybrid Meeting
Washington DC

ATTENDEES

Committee Members Present:

- | | |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. Nate Todd – Chair | 8. Dr. Franco Santos |
| 2. Dr. Jennifer Martin – New Chair | 9. Dr. Christiana Dillahunt-Aspillaga |
| 3. Robert Hines | 10. Dr. John Milam |
| 4. Dr. Tiffany Drain | 11. Jacqueline Breitenstein |
| 5. Lawrence Rhone | 12. Robert Hamilton |
| 6. Dr. Terri K. Pogoda | 13. Dr. James McRavian |
| 7. Dr. Michelle Peterson | 14. Luis Newberry |

Ex-Officio Members:

- John Savage
- Nick Pamperin
- Dr. Kristi Hill (Absent)
- Dr. Lisa Ottomanelli

Committee Members Absent:

- Lorenza Hillard

Department of Veterans Affairs Staff:

- David Smith, Designated Federal Officer (DFO)
- Lynn Horwatt, DFO
- Latrese Thompson (Absent)

Wednesday, August 2, 2023

Welcome/Opening Remarks:

Mr. Nate Todd, Chair, called the Committee to order at 10:00 a.m. (EST). The Chair proceeded with a roll call of members present, a review of the agenda and Rules of Engagement.

VACOR Briefings:

Loraine Spangler, Policy Analyst with Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E)
Service: Legislative Proposals

Ms. Spangler briefed the Committee on the new fiscal year 2025 Legislative Proposals.

New Proposals:

- Redefining the Definition of Employment Handicap and Serious Employment Handicap
- Payments for On-the-Job Training and Apprenticeship in Emergency Situations
- Timely Certification of Training for Chapter 31 Veterans
- Provide Rate Protection When the Amounts Payable for Monthly Subsistence Allowance are Reduced from One Year to the Next
- Clarifying Payment Date for Adjusting Basic Housing Allowances Rates
- Revision of the Post 9/11 Subsistence Allowance Rate for Distance or On-line Learning Format
- Expansion of Employment Services under 38 U.S.C.3117

Resubmissions:

- Revision of Criteria for Additional Subsistence Allowance Payments for
- Claimants who are Displaced by a Natural or Other Disaster
- Update the Nomenclature Used in Chapter 31
- Revise VR&E Subsistence Allowance Payment Rates
- Update Subsistence Allowance Rate Tables
- Calculating Available Chapter 31 Entitlement
- Remove VR&E Program from the Rounding Out Authority in 38 U.S.C. 3680(a)(3)

Dr. Jeffery Bates, Deputy Director for Clinical Care for the Veterans Crisis Line:
VA Suicide Prevention Program and Suicide Hotline Routing

Dr. Bates briefed the Committee on the Veterans Crisis Line (VCL). Dr. Bates stressed that suicide is preventable but, we must have a public health strategy to achieve it. The VCL provides Veterans with an easy-to-remember number, dialing 988 and pressing one will connect Veterans and their loved ones with crisis support quickly and efficiently. The VCL has trained responders who undergo four weeks of classroom training before taking calls with customers. The responders help determine the level of need and understanding of the Veteran and collaborate with the Veteran to promote self-determination and engage in a 3-step mitigation plan.

Two key aspects of VCL services:

- Creates respect-filled, safe place for Veterans to share what they are struggling with.
- Provides someone to talk to who cares but is not directly involved in the outcome.

The Veteran Crisis Line website, www.VeteransCrisisLine.net is available for Veterans to find additional resources and support.

Ms. Jacqueline Zepp, Employment Coordinator with VR&E Service

Ms. Zepp provided an overview of the Non-Paid Work Experience Program (NPWE) and the Department of Labor (DOL) Partnership Joint Work Group (JWG).

The NPWE program provides eligible participants the opportunity to concurrently obtain training and practical job experience at the same time. Benefits of the NPWE program include helping VR&E participants to build a stronger resume, establish an employment history and provide hands-on work experience in their vocational area.

Additionally, VR&E staff assist the employer with any required paperwork to support the NPWE opportunity. The employer can assess the participants' work ethic and ensure they fit well. The employer can noncompetitively hire participants, if a position becomes available in their program. This also helps employers hire difficult positions that must be filled more often.

In 1995, a national memorandum of agreement between DOL and VR&E Service was formalized. The primary goal of the collaborative effort between the two agencies was to improve the quality of employment services and outcomes for each VR&E participant. This partnership increases communication, reduces duplication of effort and enhances the quality of services provided to VR&E participants working in a unified team approach.

Public Comments: None

Working Session:

The Committee used the working session to review and discuss data regarding potential recommendations.

Thursday, August 3, 2023

Welcome/Opening Remarks:

Mr. Todd, Chair called the Committee to order at 9:00 a.m. (EST). The Chair proceeded with a roll call of members present, a review of the agenda and Rules of Engagement.

VACOR Briefings:

Mr. Nick Pamperin, VR&E Service Executive Director

Mr. Pamperin briefed on how VR&E is continuing to modernize to serve the needs of Veterans, Service members and their eligible family members. Mr. Pamperin shared how VR&E is staying connected to Veterans and their concerns by utilizing outreach and collaboration events and participating in several job fairs nationwide and virtually. Mr. Pamperin thanked VACOR for their time and dedication to improving the rehabilitation needs of Veterans.

Mr. Robert Parks, Compensation Service Chief: Part 3 Regulations

Mr. Parks briefed on the following topics:

- Service-Connected Disability Compensation
- Employment impacts on compensation benefits
- Individual Unemployability (IU) benefits
- Unemployed vs. unemployable
- Permanent and Total (P&T) vs. IU
- Impact of employment on IU and Reductions.

Service-Connected Disability Compensation is a tax-free monetary benefit paid to Veterans with disabilities resulting from a disease or injury incurred or aggravated during active military service.

Compensation may also be paid for post-service disabilities that are considered related or secondary to disabilities occurring in service and for disabilities presumed to be related to circumstances of military service, even though they may arise after service.

IU (also referred to as total disability based on individual unemployability) is a compensation benefit that allows eligible Veterans who are unable to secure or follow substantially gainful employment to be paid at the 100% compensation rate.

P&T evaluations versus IU compensation benefits are not impacted by employment or income status for a Veteran who is evaluated at the 100 percent disabled rate or 100% permanent and total. Veterans receiving compensation payments at the 100% disabled rate based on IU may impacted by their employment status.

Public Comments: None

Working Session: The proposed recommendations were further discussed. Members were assigned in pairs to focus on the three recommendations and rationale:

- **Recommendation #1:** All local VR&E office voicemail messages to add (a) the following language and (b) the automated option, “If you are having a medical or mental health emergency, hang up and dial 911. If you are having thoughts of suicide, press 7 now to be connected with the Veterans Crisis Line or you may hang up and dial 988 and then press 1.”

Rationale: Callers to VR&E offices may be in crisis and offering information on where to seek help may prevent further emergency, including suicide. The VA national number (1-800-827-1000), outgoing messages at medical centers, and VA websites provide information and automated options for obtaining help through the Veterans Crisis Line. Adding similar information to local VR&E offices would provide consistency across VA platforms.

- **Recommendation #2:** Update all VBA contact information on the websites listed on <https://www.benefits.va.gov/benefits/offices.asp> to include correct address, phone number and hours of operation, as well as ensure all internal links go to their intended target webpage. Some weblinks on the aforementioned webpage are broken.

Rationale: Correct information facilitates access to services, enhances the experience for the Veteran and caregiver and increases confidence and trust in VA.

Additional Information

Jennifer Martin was appointed as the new Chair for this Committee. VACOR subgroup members reviewed a website that lists VBA regional offices and additional facilities: <https://www.benefits.va.gov/benefits/offices.asp>. A sample of 61 geographically distributed regional and other VBA facilities was selected. Links for each

site were followed to identify telephone contact information. Listed phone numbers were contacted for outgoing voicemail instructions regarding thoughts of suicide.

Next meeting:

Administrative Meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, October 24, 2023, 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. (EST).

Field visit meeting is tentatively scheduled for April 4-6, 2024. VA Medical Center and Regional Office recommendations: Seattle, WA, San Diego, CA, Los Angeles, CA or Oakland, CA.

The Committee adjourned at 3:00 p.m. (EST).

Submitted:

/s/
Nate Todd
VACOR Chair
October 17, 2023

/s/
Latrese Thompson
Designated Federal Officer
October 17, 2023