

**Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)**  
**Advisory Committee on Outlying Areas and Freely Associated States**  
Meeting Minutes  
December 10, 2024  
6:00 a.m. - 3:30 p.m. Chamorro Standard Time

**Attending Committee Members:**

1. Kalani Kaneko, Chair, Marshall Islands
2. Fa'alagiga Nina Tua'au-Glaude', Vice-Chair, American Samoa
3. Alex Ortiz, Puerto Rico
4. Alexis Martinez, Puerto Rico
5. Arielle Buyum, Northern Mariana Islands
6. Norvert Yano, Palau
7. Mercedes Libian, Federated States of Micronesia
8. Swinston Siba, Federated States of Micronesia
9. Leo Falcam, Federated States of Micronesia
10. James Kennedy Benjamin, Northern Mariana Islands
11. Vincent Borja, Guam
12. Tina Rose Muna-Barnes, Guam

**Ex-officio Members Present:**

- John Brewer, Department of Interior

**Other VA Leadership and Staff:**

- Margaret Kabat, VA Chief of Staff
- Joshua Jacobs, Under Secretary for Benefits, Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA)
- Dr. Miguel LaPuz, Senior Advisor to the Deputy Under Secretary for Health, Veterans Health Administration (VHA)
- Zaneta Adams, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Intergovernmental Affairs, Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs (OPIA)
- RimaAnn Nelson, Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Operations
- Melissa Cohen, Executive Director, Outreach, Transition, and Economic Development (OTED)
- John Green, Deputy Executive Director, OTED
- Andrew Szymczak, Program Management Officer, Integrated External Networks
- Bernard Johnson, Designated Federal Officer (DFO), OTED
- Ferdinand Torres-Leon, Alternate DFO, OTED
- Donald Harbert, Management Analyst, OTED
- Jeffrey Moragne, Director, VA Advisory Committee Management Office (ACMO)
- Jelessa M. Burney, Program Specialist, ACMO
- Ada Clark, Network Director, VA Sierra Pacific Network (VISN 21)
- Carol Borden, Ethics Attorney, Office of General Counsel (OGC)

- Traci Winston, VA OGC
- Dr. Kevin McDermott, VA Guam Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC)
- Amy Rohlf, Public Affairs Office (PAO) (VISN 21)
- Armenthis Lester, Public Affairs Specialist
- James Ingebredtder, VA Pacific Islands Healthcare System
- Christine Kramer, VA Pacific Islands Healthcare System
- April Seghorn, VA Pacific Islands Healthcare System
- Reyneil Almagro, Transportation Clerk and Assistant, VA
- Katherine Cassell, Veteran Services Officer
- Bryan James Keyes, Chief, Health Administration Office, VHA
- Sidath Panangala, Congressional Research Service
- Adam Robinson, Director, VA Pacific Islands Health Care System
- Devin Woods, Associate Director, VA Pacific Islands Health Care System
- Donald Banik, Deputy Chief of Staff, VA Pacific Islands Health Care System
- Ferdinand Draceros, Health Care System, VHA
- Michael Thompson, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
- Danica Pinson, Health Care Specialist, VA Pacific Islands Health Care System
- Kristina Tallerico, Executive Management Officer, Pacific District
- Sedra Graves, Health System Specialist, VA Pacific Islands Health Care System
- James Sewell, Member Services Chief, VA Pacific Islands Health Care System
- Katherine Pope, Nurse Executive, VA Pacific Islands Health Care System
- Tanya Eubanks, Guam Office of Veteran Services
- Alicia Skolrood, Executive Director, Integrated External Networks
- Natalie Cole, Deputy Director, Integrated External Networks

**Also Present:**

- Gretchen Sierra-Zorita, Director for Puerto Rico and Territories, Office of Intergovernmental Affairs
- Ambassador Jackson Soram, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) Ambassador to the United States
- Director Hainrick Panuelo, FSM National Office of Veterans Affairs
- Ambassador Charles Paul, Republic of the Marshal Islands
- Deputy Assistant Secretary Kehlen Halbert, FSM Department of Foreign Affairs
- Roger Keen
- Jaime Matthews
- Andre Glaude'
- Greg Ngirmang
- Victor Milam, Joint Task Force Micronesia
- Frederick Haerter, United States Army Pacific
- Eddy Ruiz
- Genelyn Paz

- Chirag Bhojwani
- Alan Cipeds
- Arielle Aimoto
- Evangelis Babauta
- Florina Saimon
- Aran Romain
- Joe SanAustin
- Tara Fajardo Arteaga
- Sedra Gavel
- Jerome Teixeira
- Craig Oswald
- Julian Bordallo
- Corinna Ballesta
- Bob Kelley
- John Taitano
- Bobbie Taitano
- Letitia Borja
- Tom Ada
- Mary Soliva
- Malone Tabidrik
- Sylvia Sheck
- Anthony Tajjeron
- Vicki Shambaugh

**Tuesday, December 10, 2024**

The annual meeting of the Advisory Committee on United States Outlying Areas and Freely Associated States was held in Tamuning, Guam, and virtually via Microsoft Teams. The session was open to the public, and the meeting information and teleconference number were published in a Federal Register announcement.

Mr. Bernard Johnson began by recognizing and welcoming the special guests, including Ambassador Jackson Soran, FSM Ambassador to the U.S., Director Hainrick Panuelo from the FSM National Office of Veterans Affairs, Assistant Secretary Halbert from FSM Foreign Affairs, and Ambassador Charles Paul from the Republic of the Marshall Islands. He noted that the meeting would cover many important topics, as requested by the committee.

Mr. Johnson then introduced the Committee Vice Chair, Ms. Fa'alagiga Nina Tua'au-Glaude', who conducted the roll call of committee members and confirmed that a quorum was present. The meeting continued with introductions from committee members, special guests, presenters, and attendees.

**Committee Introductions**

Each committee member and ex-officio in attendance introduced themselves. 12 of the 15 appointed committee members were in attendance. One of the three ex-officio members was in attendance.

## **Opening Remarks**

Mr. Johnson opened the meeting by expressing his gratitude to everyone, noting that it has been a year since the inaugural meeting in Puerto Rico. He acknowledged and appreciated everyone's time and effort in traveling to attend, with special thanks to committee members for their commitment to serving Veterans and being part of this advisory committee, which is tasked with addressing challenges and making recommendations to the Secretary on better supporting these communities.

Mr. Johnson emphasized the committee's purpose: to focus on providing care for Veterans in U.S. Outlying Areas and Freely Associated States. He highlighted that the goal is to identify key issues and find ways to improve services and access to benefits for these Veterans services and access to benefits.

## **Briefing On Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) 101 – Overview and Advisory Committee Management Office (ACMO) Updates**

Ms. Jelessa M. Burney provided an overview of FACA 101, covering key aspects such as establishing advisory committees, the FACA final rule, and related requirements. She reminded attendees about meeting protocols, emphasizing the roles of the Designated Federal Officer (DFO) and Assistant DFO (ADFO) and the importance of meeting in person or virtually with a quorum present.

Ms. Burney explained that "closed meetings" are only held in special circumstances, such as discussing confidential information, and the Office of General Counsel (OGC) makes this determination. She explained that private meetings, such as subcommittee sessions or administrative work, are allowed for research or gathering information.

Ms. Burney emphasized the critical importance of speaking with "one voice" as a committee, ensuring that all members are aligned in their efforts and that the committee's recommendations are presented as a unified front. She stressed that reaching a consensus is essential for effective decision-making and ensuring that the committee's work carries weight and influence. She also highlighted best practices for committee participation, the need for active engagement, and the benefits of cross- subcommittee collaboration.

### **Questions and Answers:**

Mr. Alex Ortiz inquired about cross-committee collaboration, asking if it is restricted to VA or if it extends across FACA. Ms. Burney clarified that it is limited to VA.

Ms. Tua'au-Glaude' inquired about reports from other advisory committees, asking if any could be used as guidelines or references to help with the draft report for this committee.

Ms. Tua'au-Glaude' also asked if issues or recommendations from other committees' reports could be referenced or included if relevant to this committee's work. Ms. Burney confirmed that other reports are available for review and reference. She added that if a subcommittee identifies something from another committee's report, it must be presented to the parent committee for a vote on whether the recommendation should be included.

### **Briefing On Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Orientation/VHA Initiatives and Updates**

Mr. Johnson introduced Dr. Miguel LaPuz, who represented the Honorable Dr. Shereef Elnahal, Under Secretary for Health. Dr. LaPuz expressed gratitude to the committee chair and committee members for their commitment to improving care for Veterans and thanked several individuals in the room, including Dr. RimaAnn Nelson and Ms. Ada Clark, for supporting VISN 21.

Dr. LaPuz gave an overview of the VHA Mission, highlighting its four statutory missions: Care Delivery, Education, Research, and Emergency Response. As the largest integrated healthcare system in the United States, VHA operates medical facilities and clinics nationwide, serving 9 million Veterans, completing 87 million outpatient appointments, and employing over 410,000 staff members. VHA offers care through its medical facilities and community care programs, with funding provided by VA. In addition to medical services, VHA's impact extends to programs focused on Caregiver Support, Homelessness, and Suicide Prevention.

Dr. LaPuz presented data from the U.S. Outlying Areas and the Freely Associated States, highlighting the number of enrolled Veterans and available facilities. For example, Guam has 5,932 enrolled Veterans and 1 CBOC, and American Samoa has 1,034 enrolled Veterans and 1 CBOC. He also outlined common concerns from these areas, including long travel times and costs for Veterans, limited access to specialty care, and language barriers. In response, VISN 8 introduced an air charter service to assist Veterans traveling between the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico for care. An additional recent improvement includes the introduction of shuttle buses to transport Veterans in Puerto Rico from the airport to the VA Caribbean Healthcare for care.

Dr. LaPuz discussed how VHA is aware of the challenges and limitations, such as statutes and laws, the lack of travel coverage or benefits, and restrictions within the Foreign Medical Program (FMP) program. He noted that in March 2024, the President signed the Consolidated Appropriations Act 2024, allowing VA to expand healthcare access for Veterans in the Freely Associated States (FAS). He expressed pride in the progress and assured the committee that more information on the Compact of Free Association (COFA) would be provided in upcoming briefings. He concluded by emphasizing the committee's importance and highlighted how it can assist VHA by aggregating and validating data, offering recommendations and solutions, and participating in outreach and communication.

Questions and Answers:

Mr. Ortiz noted the ongoing issue of hiring medical professionals in Puerto Rico and the need to understand how pay grades can be adjusted to better compensate and retain medical staff on the island. He pointed out that many of these professionals also serve U.S. Virgin Island Veterans. Dr. LaPuz acknowledged that Congress has granted significant flexibility in terms of pay and recommended that the next step is to reach out to VISN 8 to explore VA's current flexibility and capabilities. Dr. LaPuz said he would follow up on this matter with VISN 8.

Ms. Tua'au-Glaude' discussed the shuttle service in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands that transport Veterans to and from the airport, drawing attention to what she said was a major issue in American Samoa. She explained that Veterans in American Samoa face significant barriers in accessing care, as there are only two flights per week in and out of the island. This limited transportation is a serious concern, often leading to worsened medical conditions for Veterans. Ms. Tua'au-Glaude' recounted a recent incident where two Veterans in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) were unable to leave the island for care and were dying. After contacting the White House, aircraft arrived the next day to transport them. She asked why a similar medical shuttle could not be created to help transport Veterans from American Samoa and the Pacific Islands to receive necessary care, stressing the critical need for such access. Dr. LaPuz thanked Ms. Tua'au-Glaude' for sharing her concerns and explained that the success of the shuttle service in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands allows for the opportunity to explore similar solutions in other locations.

### **Welcoming Remarks from Mr. John Green, Deputy Executive Director, Outreach, Transition and Economic Development (OTED)**

In his welcoming remarks, Mr. John Green greeted everyone and said it was his honor to attend the committee meeting. He thanked the committee members for their dedication to their important work. He acknowledged special guests, including Ambassador Jackson Soran, Director Hainrick Panuelo, Assistant Secretary Halbert, Ms. Gretchen Sierra-Zorita, and Ms. Melissa Cohen.

Mr. Green emphasized OTED's dedication to serving as the committee's program office and expressed eagerness for a productive meeting. He explained that OTED is committed to collaborating, informing, and advocating for Veterans, Service members, survivors, and their families, aiming to enhance awareness and access to VA benefits and services. He highlighted some of OTED's key services, such as transition assistance, outreach, post-separation support, and employment training. He mentioned a busy agenda featuring several briefings, including a visit to the Vet Benefits Office and the Guam Community-Based Outpatient Clinic. Mr. Green hoped the meeting would provide further insights and understanding to support completing the committee's report to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. Mr. Green then introduced Mr. Joshua Jacobs, Under Secretary for Benefits.

### **VBA's Efforts to Assist U.S. Outlying Areas and FAS Veterans, Family Members, Caregivers, and Survivors, Mr. Joshua Jacobs, Under Secretary for Benefits**

Mr. Joshua Jacobs, Under Secretary for Benefits, expressed gratitude for participating in

the meeting and thanked the Department of State, the Department of Interior, and OTED partners for their collaboration. He stated that VA is deeply committed to its mission of ensuring that all Veterans, especially those served by this committee, have access to the benefits they deserve.

Mr. Jacobs outlined the role of the VBA in delivering non-medical benefits to Veterans, families, caregivers, and survivors, including home loans and other essential services. He highlighted the progress made in increasing access and improving outcomes, citing the success of the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act of 2022( PACT Act) and the largest outreach effort in VA history, which has delivered significant results, including survivor benefits, compensation payments for disabilities, and increased payments to women Veterans.

Despite progress, Mr. Jacobs acknowledged that many Veterans face significant challenges in accessing benefits, particularly in the Freely Associated States and other remote regions. These areas present unique and complex obstacles that require tailored solutions. He emphasized that while VA is dedicated to fulfilling its duty to Veterans, this mission cannot be accomplished in isolation. VA must collaborate with local partners, agencies, and organizations to effectively meet the distinct needs of Veterans, their families, and survivors in these locations. Mr. Jacobs stressed the importance of working together, fostering strong partnerships, and leveraging collective efforts to address these ongoing challenges. He concluded by reaffirming the critical need for cooperation to ensure that Veterans in these territories receive the support and benefits they rightfully deserve, leading to improved outcomes for all involved.

#### Questions and Answers:

Ms. Tua'au-Glaude' noted that no designated person in American Samoa can assist Veterans with filing their claims. She has stepped in as a volunteer and has helped 484 American Samoan Veterans so far. She highlighted that language barriers exist in the region, as English is not the primary language. In addition to assisting with claims, Ms. Tua'au-Glaude' has been educating Veterans about the benefits available to them. She emphasized the need for someone at VA to be accessible to help American Samoa Veterans. Mr. Jacobs expressed gratitude for her comment and service. He mentioned that the regional office in Honolulu, HI, conducts outreach and claims clinics to support American Samoa, the Mariana Islands, and Guam. He suggested she contact the Pacific District Director to discuss American Samoa's specific needs and ensure appropriate outreach and resources are provided. Mr. Jacobs also stated he would consult with VA-accredited representatives and Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) to explore additional support options.

Mr. Ortiz shared insights from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) PACT Act report, which reveals that only 1% of Puerto Rico's Veterans (729 out of 68,000) are utilizing VA-guaranteed home loans as of 2023. Additionally, more than 37,000 Veterans on the island do not have a disability compensation rating. A major issue identified is that the Fiscal Oversight Management Board oversees Puerto Rico's budget and has left compensation-related positions vacant since 2012 despite laws permitting local offices to

assist with compensation. Mr. Ortiz emphasized the need to improve benefits delivery but noted that the Fiscal Oversight Management Board, created by Congress, limits their actions. He also pointed out confusion around Veterans' benefits, particularly concerning the VetSuccess On Campus Program (VSOC). Mr. Ortiz inquired whether there has been any communication between VA and the local governments or the Fiscal Oversight Management Board to resolve these issues. Mr. Jacobs stated that he had no immediate answer but would follow up with the VSO Liaison and the Intergovernmental Affairs Office. He also mentioned that he is unfamiliar with the home loan statistics provided but will investigate and follow up on that. Mr. Jacobs acknowledged the unique challenges faced by Puerto Rico and other islands and territories. He noted that despite VBA's launch of the most extensive outreach effort, Veterans are still not being reached. VBA recognizes more work to be done and is focused on finding new ways to connect with partners and communicate effectively. Mr. Jacobs also highlighted the value of the VSOC program, though he emphasized that demand continues to outpace the available resources. Mr. Jacobs said he would contact the San Juan Regional Office to address these matters.

Mr. Kalani Kaneko mentioned that there is no designated VBA point of contact for the FAS. He highlighted the challenges survivors face who are uncertain about how or who to contact at VA. He asked if there is a designated point of contact to assist Veterans and their families with issues and questions in the FAS. Mr. Jacobs noted there is an Office of Survivors' Assistance within VA and offered to provide the contact information for it. He also mentioned that information on VBA and the appropriate contacts for different questions or benefits can be provided. Mr. Jacobs stated he would collaborate with Mr. Pritz Navaratnasingam, the Pacific District Director, to coordinate the contact details for the FAS.

Ms. Tina Muna-Barnes acknowledged the excellent work Dr. Kevin McDermott is doing in providing patient care on the island of Guam, but she expressed concern about a gap between Veterans and VA. She highlighted the critical role that non-profit organizations in Guam play in helping Veterans access the care they need. These organizations work tirelessly to bridge the divide, often stepping in where VA services are limited. Ms. Muna-Barnes asked how VA can better support these non-profit organizations and the dedicated volunteers who assist Veterans on the island. In response, Mr. Jacobs acknowledged the many organizations VA partners with, which represent Veterans, their families, and survivors. He recognized the vital contributions these organizations make, and while he praised the ongoing partnerships and efforts, he emphasized that there is always room for improvement. Mr. Jacobs then introduced Ms. Kabat, VA Chief of Staff.

### **VA Senior Leadership Greetings, Ms. Margaret Kabat, VA Chief of Staff**

Ms. Margaret Kabat began by greeting and welcoming everyone, expressing her excitement about being part of the meeting. She spoke on behalf of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs (SECVA), extending gratitude for the committee's hard work and dedication. She emphasized that VA takes this committee's efforts seriously and is eager to review the committee's first report and recommendations in about six months. Ms. Kabat also acknowledged the significant work being done around the COFA, noting that several valuable resources were present in the room to provide further insight and answer



any questions.

Drawing from her experience implementing VA's Caregiver Support Program, including Guam, Ms. Kabat highlighted the challenges successfully addressed, such as travel difficulties, time zone differences, and cultural barriers. She stressed the importance of gathering direct feedback from those on the ground to identify areas for improvement. She assured the committee that VA is fully equipped to offer effective support to Veterans, families, caregivers, and survivors, demonstrating VA's ongoing commitment to meeting their needs and enhancing the services provided.

Questions and Answers:

Mr. Kaneko inquired about the SECVA's plans to support Veterans in the FAS. He mentioned that the President signed the COFA legislation in March, and the focus has primarily been on data collection. Mr. Kaneko requested that the issue of mailing prescriptions from VA hospitals to Veterans' PO Boxes in the FAS be addressed, asking for a clear strategy and timeline from VA leadership to tackle COFA-related challenges. Ms. Kabat responded that there were COFA meetings in Guam this week, and there is a mandate to engage with the local governments of the FAS by March 2025. She indicated that further collaboration and detailed planning would follow. Ms. Adams and Ms. Nelson provided an update on the status of COFA planning. They shared that the team has been meeting monthly with the governments of the COFA areas, a process that began several months ago. Their efforts have been centered on gathering information and fostering dialogue. The first in-person meetings were held here in Guam over the past few days.

Mr. Leo Falcam expressed his gratitude for the signing of COFA. However, he noted that the legislation primarily focuses on healthcare access for Veterans. Mr. Falcam emphasized that focusing on VBA and ensuring Veterans have access to benefits is equally important. Ms. Kabat acknowledged his comments and highlighted the presence of VBA at the meeting, mentioning that they would be providing a briefing on their ongoing efforts to reach Veterans in the FAS and other outlying areas.

Mr. Ortiz referred to a GAO report, which states that the way VET POP collects information and data for Veterans in the FAS and outlying areas "needs work" and that the recommendation remains open. He asked whether this issue is being addressed, as accurate data is crucial for effective Veteran services. Ms. Kabat acknowledged that she had no definitive answer but agreed that the issue is important. She stressed the importance of finding effective ways to provide these areas with the required benefits and care, noting that this can only be achieved with accurate population data. She said that VA is actively working to enhance VET POP.

### **Briefing On Ethics Brief/OGE 450**

Ms. Carol Borden thanked the committee for their dedication and introduced Traci Winston, Chief Counsel of the Ethics Specialty Team. She explained that committee members are Special Government Employees (SGEs). Ms. Borden noted that SGEs are protected and encouraged committee members to seek advice on ethical matters. She

addressed several key topics, including the importance of identifying and managing conflicts of interest, upholding the highest standards of integrity, and adhering to the strict prohibition on accepting payments or gifts from outside sources. She emphasized the need for transparency and accountability in all actions to ensure that committee members remain impartial and maintain the public trust. She outlined several federal statutes that can impact SGEs, including criminal statutes tied to financial conflicts of interest, representational activities, and post-employment restrictions. She also discussed the Hatch Act, which limits the political activities of government employees.

Ms. Borden highlighted that ethics advice is available during a committee member's time serving and even after the member leaves the committee. She concluded by stating that she and her team would be available to answer any questions throughout the meeting and encouraged members to reach out.

### **Briefing On Foreign Medical Program (FMP)**

Mr. Andrew Szymczak provided an overview of the FMP, which reimburses Veterans living or traveling abroad for healthcare services, medications, and durable medical equipment related to service-connected conditions. He emphasized that eligibility for the program is not dependent on disability percentage and covers treatment for service-connected conditions regardless of where the Veteran lives. He announced the claims process has a new online registration option to simplify the process and emphasized that claims must be linked to a service-connected diagnosis. He clarified that the program does not cover travel costs and highlighted the new Ask VA Portal (AVA), which allows veterans to ask specific FMP-related questions.

#### **Questions and Answers:**

Ms. Adams inquired about recommendations for increasing the number of providers participating in deferability. She asked whether initiatives are in place to train and educate providers in areas like the Freely Associated States on deferability, its purpose, and what services would be covered. Mr. Szymczak responded that there is currently no formal initiative in place, but he and the escalation team are happy to provide an ad hoc overview upon request. He clarified that, as the FMP is a global program, there has not yet been targeted outreach to any specific country. In response, Ms. Adams suggested that, given its relevance to COFA, this would be an excellent starting point for such outreach efforts.

Mr. Kaneko pointed out the limited medical facilities and lack of private clinics in the Marshall Islands, noting that Veterans must travel to the Philippines for care in many instances. He asked if the FMP program covers medical treatments or care received in the Philippines. Mr. Szymczak confirmed that the FMP covers medical care in the Philippines but does not cover any associated travel expenses.

Ms. Tua'au-Glaude' expressed how important and valuable the FMP program is, sharing that she has personally signed up and benefits from its services. Mr. Szymczak thanked her and expressed appreciation for her feedback.

Mr. Ortiz asked whether the FMP tracks the address where Veterans reside to process reimbursements. He noted that some Veterans in Puerto Rico travel to the Dominican Republic for care and inquired how this impacts the reimbursement process. Mr. Szymczak confirmed that reimbursements are sent to domestic addresses and acknowledged that this is a common question. He explained that if a Veteran travels to the Dominican Republic for care, medical documentation showing the location and the services provided is required, and the reimbursement will be sent to the address on the claim form.

Mr. Vincent Borja asked if a Veteran living in the Philippines who visits Guam and receives medical care would be eligible for FMP. Mr. Szymczak explained that Veterans cannot file FMP claims for care received in Guam, as it is not considered a foreign country.

Ms. Mercedes Libian inquired about the timeline for receiving Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) payments once implemented, specifically compared to the current 120-day wait for check payments. She asked if EBT would offer a quicker payment option. Mr. Szymczak clarified that the timeline for check payments depends on the destination and that mail delivery times can vary. However, he confirmed that EBT payments would be faster, as reimbursements would be received immediately after processing, without the delays associated with the mail system.

Mr. Falcam asked for clarification on how to use FMP, specifically whether it applies when a Veteran from the FAS travels to Guam. Mr. Szymczak confirmed that FMP does not apply when traveling from FAS to Guam. Mr. Falcam then asked if he, as a FAS Veteran receiving care from local FSM providers, would be eligible for FMP. Mr. Szymczak confirmed that FMP does apply within the FAS if the care is for service-connected conditions but noted again that travel costs are not covered.

### **Briefing on VISN 21 Sierra Pacific**

Ms. Ada Clark provided an overview of VISN 21 Sierra Pacific, detailing its size, budget, enrollees, and outpatient visits. She discussed key care sites, workforce diversity, and the Veteran population served. As a leader in telehealth, VISN 21 offers numerous services through its Clinical Resource Hub (CRH). Ms. Clark highlighted important partnerships with the Department of Defense (DoD), academic affiliations, and research programs. The network invests in Community Care programs and prioritizes quality and patient safety. She also noted the challenges faced by VISN 21, including an area spanning 294,000 miles and encountering issues like those identified by committee members regarding Veterans in outlying areas. Despite these challenges, VISN 21 remains committed to providing equitable healthcare across the Pacific region.

### **Questions and Answers:**

Ms. Tua'au-Glaude' raised concerns about transportation issues, stressing that Veterans are dying because they cannot secure flights. She asked what actions are being taken to address this and how the problem can be solved. Ms. Clark responded that VISN 8

continues researching potential solutions, charters, or special contracts and has potential partnerships with airline management that may help address the issue.

Mr. Ortiz asked about the impactful initiatives at VISN 21, particularly the focus groups, and how these efforts are being developed to ensure Veterans' voices are heard. He expressed his interest in advocating for similar strategies to be implemented in Puerto Rico. In response, Ms. Clark explained that she visits all VISN 21 sites at least twice yearly. During these visits, she works closely with local teams to develop actionable plans and strategies. She highlighted the importance of continuous communication and regular outreach events to keep everyone informed and engaged.

Ms. Amy Rohlfs provided insights into PACT Act-specific outreach events held in Guam, emphasizing the significance of these community-driven initiatives. She described them as a "community call" for Veterans to register and receive assistance with the PACT Act. Ms. Rohlfs reported a 23% increase in participation in Guam, attributing this growth to the expanded outreach efforts. She noted that VBA, subject matter experts (SMEs), VSOs, and VA representatives are all actively engaged in these initiatives to ensure Veterans receive the necessary support. Ms. Rohlfs expressed pride in the progress and positive impact of these efforts.

Dr. Adam Robinson expressed pride in the ongoing efforts within the VA Pacific Islands, acknowledging the challenges faced while highlighting the significant progress and improvements made. Dr. Robin noted an increase in Veterans enrolled in the PACT Act and a 30% rise in the number of Veterans receiving care within the VA Pacific network.

### **Briefing on Compacts of Free Association (COFA) Amendments Act**

Ms. Adams and Ms. Nelson provided an overview of the COFA. They emphasized their focus on addressing the clinical needs of Veterans in the FAS, specifically hospital care, travel for care, and identifying and bridging gaps in healthcare services.

Ms. Adams noted that the COFA Act was signed into law in March 2024. This historic legislation allows VA to expand access to healthcare for Veterans in the FAS, with discretionary authority to provide hospital care, medical services, and beneficiary travel, regardless of service connection. However, agreements must be established with the FAS governments before implementing these services.

Key tasks include outreach to FAS governments, assessing care delivery options, and increasing staffing to support these efforts. Data gathering is essential, with only an estimated 132 Veterans in the FAS enrolled in VA healthcare as of 2023. The needs assessment will focus on healthcare infrastructure, geographical and technological barriers, and population impact. A project team from various VA and VHA offices is actively working on research, analysis, and implementation plans, following a defined schedule with milestones to ensure progress. Ongoing meetings and data collection will continue to address the needs of Veterans in the FAS.

### **Questions and Answers:**

Ms. Tua'au-Glaude' emphasized the importance of advocating for young Veterans,

particularly those injured in war, and a 30% disability rating. She asked why healthcare is unavailable to them at this rating and if SECVA could address this issue. Ms. Nelson stressed the importance of outreach and education for Veterans, encouraging them to reassess their disability rating and VBA benefits regularly. She highlighted that ongoing education and outreach are crucial in ensuring Veterans are aware of their rights and benefits. Ms. Adams emphasized that the signed law made SECVA's support of this committee possible. However, she noted that SECVA currently has no authority to change the 30% disability rating threshold or alter the ratings that are or are not covered by VA programs.

Ms. Tua'au-Glaude' followed up with concerns regarding the mental health challenges and rising suicide rates among younger Veterans in the islands and surrounding areas. Mr. Kaneko outlined key healthcare challenges in the Marshall Islands, noting the limited number of healthcare providers and the unique issues faced by Veterans in the region. He discussed Section 177 of the COFA Act, which mandates care for Veterans affected by nuclear testing, and inquired whether it would be feasible to establish a clinic or provider in the Marshall Islands for this purpose. Ms. Nelson responded that it is possible, emphasizing that assessing the region's needs and gathering data are crucial to determining the necessary infrastructure for providing such care.

Mr. Falcam clarified that the number of Veterans enrolled probably only represents Veterans who have been documented and tracked. He pointed out that the numbers for FSM and FAS are inaccurate, as many Veterans have not felt the need to enroll in benefits. Mr. Falcam expressed appreciation for the workaround COFA and acknowledged that there is still much to be done. Ms. Nelson responded with a key question that has arisen during the COFA discussions: "If these services were available on the islands, would our Veterans return?" She mentioned that many have answered this with a "Yes."

Mr. Ortiz noted that the COFA project and its implementation share similarities with the work of the Committee, such as engaging with VSOs, conducting interviews, and gathering data. He inquired whether Veterans who COFA covers are involved in the meetings or discussions. Ms. Adams explained that the COFA meetings are strictly limited to government officials, with no public attendees due to the sensitive nature of the topics discussed. However, she assured Mr. Ortiz that Veterans' perspectives are being incorporated through collaboration with Veteran organizations. Ms. Adams also emphasized that this committee is represented in the COFA meetings, as some members serve in other roles on the COFA implementation team.

Mr. Ortiz asked for guidance on successful strategies, resources, and communication methods used in the COFA interviews and planning, noting that these tools could benefit Veterans in Puerto Rico. Ms. Adams recommended collaborating with the Veteran Experience Office to help develop a plan, including outreach programs, listening sessions, and virtual events. She emphasized the importance of continuous information sharing to ensure effective communication and outreach.

Ms. Arielle Buyum expressed gratitude for the progress being made on COFA. She

agreed with Mr. Ortiz's comments about the timing of the committee's report and the COFA needs assessment and emphasized the importance of the ongoing discussions. Ms. Buyum asked about funding, when will the budget for this be determined, or if there is a specific point in the implementation plan where funding is requested. Ms. Nelson referenced the brief, noting that key data, such as the number of Veterans served, must be accurately reflected, as it directly influences costs related to medical transportation and service capabilities. She acknowledged that the budget component is still not finalized but noted that the commitment is in place, work has already begun, and addressing these needs remains a priority.

Ms. Tua'au-Glaude' asked a follow-up question regarding the timeline for determining the budget. Ms. Adams responded that she did not have a specific answer at this time but emphasized the importance of continuing to gather the necessary information to formulate a budget. She acknowledged that changes in administration and other factors could influence the budget and timeline. Ms. Adams also announced that she would be leaving in January 2025 but assured the committee that a continuity plan was in place for the next steps moving forward.

### **Discussion and Takeaways**

Committee members discussed the status of the draft report. Mr. Kaneko emphasized the importance of thoroughly reviewing the draft to ensure that each member's contributions are accurately included and fully addressed. He encouraged all members to carefully check that their input is complete and accurately reflected in the document. To move the process forward, Mr. Kaneko proposed holding a vote on December 12, 2025, to determine whether the draft report is ready for final approval. If the committee members agree, the report will be considered finalized and prepared to be submitted to the DFO and ADFO for further review and action. The vote is to ensure all necessary revisions are complete and the report can move to the next phase of the approval process.

Mr. Ortiz commented on the need for clearer roles and responsibilities among committee members, suggesting that general guidelines be established for conducting business. He also noted concerns about low participation and attendance at subcommittee meetings, emphasizing the importance of having a quorum. He proposed addressing these issues before leaving Guam. He expressed the need to set deadlines and establish rules of operation to improve efficiency and work better moving forward.

Mr. Kaneko addressed the confusion surrounding the committee's name, which led to a discussion among committee members. He explained that while "FAS" has been used informally, it has led to misunderstandings, particularly considering the recent COFA legislation. The committee refers to itself as the "FAS Committee" in internal communications and meeting invites. Mr. Kaneko clarified that Congress officially named the committee the *Advisory Committee on U.S. Outlying Areas and Freely Associated States*. To avoid further confusion, it was agreed that the report would use the committee's correct official name or refer to it as "the committee."

Ms. Burney provided an overview of the process for submitting the committee's draft

report. A copy of the report is provided to the DFO, and simultaneously, both ACMO and VBA also receive copies. VBA will then assign responsibility for responding to the recommendations outlined in the report. Once the responses are drafted, the report is returned to the DFO for review and approval. At this point, it transitions from a draft to a final report. The finalized report is then sent by ACMO to various VA offices for review and concurrence before being submitted to the SECVA and Congress.

### **Calendar Discussion Part 1**

Upcoming subcommittee meeting dates and cadence to be scheduled.  
The next annual meeting will be scheduled in the July-September 2025 timeframe.

### **Day Closeout / Updates / Reminders**

Mr. Kaneko provided an overview of the agenda for Day 2, including a scheduled tour of VA Guam CBOC and Vet Center.

### **Adjournment**

Mr. Kaneko acknowledged the participants' call for a motion to adjourn.

### **Meeting Adjourned**

**Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)**  
**Advisory Committee on Outlying Areas and Freely Associated States**  
Meeting Minutes  
December 11, 2024  
6:00 a.m. - 3:30 p.m. Chamorro Standard Time

**Attending Committee Members:**

1. Kalani Kaneko, Chair, Marshall Islands
2. Fa'alagiga Nina Tua'au-Glaude', Vice-Chair, American Samoa
3. Alex Ortiz, Puerto Rico
4. Alexis Martinez, Puerto Rico
5. Arielle Buyum, Northern Mariana Islands
6. Norvert Yano, Palau
7. Mercedes Libian, Federated States of Micronesia
8. Swinston Siba, Federated States of Micronesia
9. Leo Falcam, Federated States of Micronesia
10. James Kennedy Benjamin, Northern Mariana Islands
11. Vincent Borja, Guam
12. Tina Rose Muna-Barnes, Guam

**Ex-officio Members Present:**

- John Brewer, Department of Interior

**Other VA Leadership and Staff:**

- Zaneta Adams, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Intergovernmental Affairs, Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs (OPIA)
- RimaAnn Nelson, Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Operations
- Melissa Cohen, Executive Director, Outreach, Transition, and Economic Development (OTED)
- Adam Kijanski, Veterans Experience Office (VEO), Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA)
- Dr. Gloriann Watson, Chief, Pharmacy, VA Pacific Islands Health Care System
- Dr. Chaz Barit, Associate Chief, VA Pharmacy Pacific Islands Health Care System
- Richard Teel, Veterans Transportation Program, VHA
- Omayra Brabham, Associate Chief Nurse, Connected Care, VHA
- Bernard Johnson, Designated Federal Officer (DFO), OTED
- Ferdinand Torres-Leon, Alternate DFO, OTED
- Donald Harbert, Management Analyst, OTED
- Jelessa M. Burney, Program Specialist, ACOMO
- Pritz Navaratnasingam, Pacific District Office Director
- Ada Clark, Network Director, VA Sierra Pacific Network (VISN 21)



- Carol Borden, Ethics Attorney, Office of General Counsel (OGC)
- Traci Winston, VA OGC
- Dr. Kevin McDermott, VA Guam Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC)
- Amy Rohlf, Public Affairs Office (PAO) (VISN 21)
- Armenthis Lester, Public Affairs Specialist
- James Ingebredtder, VA Pacific Islands Healthcare System
- Christine Kramer, VA Pacific Islands Healthcare System
- April Seghorn, VA Pacific Islands Healthcare System
- Reyneil Almagro, Transportation Clerk and Assistant, VA
- Katherine Cassell, Veteran Services Officer
- Sidath Panangala, Congressional Research Service
- Adam Robinson, Director, VA Pacific Islands Health Care System
- Donald Banik, Deputy Chief of Staff, VA Pacific Islands Health Care System
- Ferdinand Draceros, Health Care System, VHA
- Michael Thompson, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
- Danica Pinson, Health Care Specialist, VA Pacific Islands Health Care System
- Kristina Tallerico, Executive Management Officer, Pacific District
- Sedra Graves, Health System Specialist, VA Pacific Islands Health Care System
- James Sewell, Member Services Chief, VA Pacific Islands Health Care System

**Also Present:**

- Gretchen Sierra-Zorita, Director for Puerto Rico and Territories, Office of Intergovernmental Affairs
- Ambassador Jackson Soram, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) Ambassador to the United States
- Director Hainrick Panuelo, FSM National Office of Veterans Affairs
- Ambassador Charles Paul, Republic of the Marshal Islands
- Deputy Assistant Secretary Kehlen Halbert, FSM Department of Foreign Affairs
- Roger Keen
- Jaime Matthews
- Andre Glaude'
- Greg Ngirmang
- Victor Milam, Joint Task Force Micronesia
- Frederick Haerter, United States Army Pacific
- Genelyn Paz
- Bobbie Taitano
- John Taitano
- Anthony Taijeron
- Chirag Bhojwani
- Aran Ramain
- Joe SanAustin

- Jerome Teixeira
- Julian Bordallo
- Corinna Ballesta
- Tom Ada
- Charlie Hermosa
- Joseph Connelley
- Siella Gabriel
- Anthony O'Bryant
- Marlene Tolliver
- Vicki Shambaugh
- Kristin Nakasato
- Mayra Brabham
- Stacey Bonnett
- Stephen Amaguin
- Colette Konson

### **Wednesday, December 11, 2024 Opening Remarks**

Mr. Johnson welcomed all attendees and officially opened the meeting. He gave a brief overview of the agenda, outlining the scheduled presenters and the key topics that would be covered throughout the session. Mr. Johnson also highlighted the upcoming tour of the Guam CBOC, emphasizing its importance in understanding the facility's operations and needs. Additionally, he provided an update regarding the afternoon session, where committee members would have dedicated time to review and discuss the draft recommendations report.

Mr. Johnson introduced Mr. Adam Kijanski, Customer Experience Implementation Supervisor, Veterans Experience Office.

### **Briefing On Veterans Experience Office (VEO)**

Mr. Adam Kijanski provided an overview of the VEO, its mission, vision, and role within VA. He explained how VEO focuses on Veterans' unique experiences, measuring their interactions through three main areas: Ease, Effectiveness, and Emotion/Empathy. Together, these elements build trust in VA.

Mr. Kijanski outlined the VEO's journey in transforming VA's customer experience, starting in 2015, and highlighted key improvements and milestones. He emphasized the importance of considering the Veteran's perspective to drive continuous service improvements. The "Veteran at the Center" framework ensures that VA focuses on key moments in a Veteran's positive or negative experience. He shared several online tools the VEO has developed to enhance the Veteran experience, such as VA.gov, the VA

Mobile Application, and the 1-800-MyVA411 hotline. VEO also distributes the Vet Resource Newsletter and other outreach materials to keep Veterans informed.

Mr. Kijanski explained how the VEO operates through the four core capabilities: data, tools, technology, and engagement. He shared insights on how the VEO gathers data directly from Veterans and their families, using platforms like VA Customer Experience Institute (VACXi) to share insights and drive improvements. He also highlighted several key programs, including the Red Coat Ambassador Program, VA Community Playbook, VA Welcome Kit, and the VA Profile system, which helps Veterans easily manage their personal information. In addition, the VEO created the Customer Experience Cookbook, which includes practical and measurable steps to achieve positive impacts across government agencies, using over 60 key ingredients commonly shared in successful customer experience initiatives.

As a result of these efforts, VA's trust score has significantly improved, increasing from 55% in 2016 to 80.2% today. Mr. Kijanski concluded by emphasizing that the VEO's ongoing work and the insights gathered through these various initiatives are helping VA provide better services and experiences for Veterans and their families.

#### Questions and Answers:

Mr. Ortiz thanked Mr. Kijanski for the briefing. He asked how VA applies its human-centered design approach to better serve Veterans in the territories and Freely Associated States. Specifically, he asked how VA addresses cultural relevance, accessibility, local languages, and adapting to the unique challenges in these regions. Mr. Kijanski acknowledged the challenges and shared that VA has previously worked with the senior advisor for Pacific strategy, creating a journey map focused on Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander Veterans. He noted that while this map does not cover everyone, VA has started considering the needs of the Freely Associated States and Pacific regions more closely. Efforts include translating materials into local languages, such as Filipino and Spanish, to serve these communities better. VA also collaborates with an Advisory Council focusing specifically on the Freely Associated States, including COFA-related aspects, and conducts surveys to guide future initiatives and ensure they address the unique needs of these regions.

Mr. Ortiz asked a follow-up question regarding the brief. One of the slides mentioned leveraging influencers to disseminate information. How does the VEO envision identifying these influencers? Mr. Ortiz explained that in Puerto Rico—though likely applicable elsewhere—over 60% of the covered Veterans are aged 65 and older. How do you suggest we pinpoint the key individuals who can effectively help spread this message? Mr. Kijanski explained that this refers to the Community Network Book, which focuses on building relationships. He acknowledged that identifying these groups, especially in Puerto Rico, could be challenging and require a more targeted approach.

He offered to connect Mr. Ortiz with individuals working on a community practice playbook for VA, who can share strategies and tips for identifying and engaging these groups. Mr. Kijanski will provide this information to Mr. Ortiz.

Mr. James Kennedy Benjamin raised a question regarding the surveys conducted through the VEO. He asked whether surveys have been undertaken in the FAS and outlying areas and if the data is being shared with regional offices. He emphasized the importance of capturing demographic and Veteran information from these regions to understand better why Veterans are not enrolling or accessing benefits. Mr. Kijanski responded by explaining that surveys are conducted with individuals already engaged with VA in some capacity. He acknowledged that the challenge lies in reaching those not currently connected to VA. He stressed the crucial role of community partners in engaging Veterans and spreading awareness about available benefits.

Ms. Tua'au-Glaude' highlighted that so many in the outlying areas and FAS are bilingual, noting that Veterans in American Samoa face significant cultural and language barriers, often discouraging them from registering with VA. She shared that she has been assisting Veterans with tasks such as translating letters and helping them understand their benefits. Ms. Tua'au-Glaude' asked what VA could do to provide further support.

Mr. Kijanski acknowledged that translation services have become a significant challenge, and VA is aware of the issue. He mentioned that a workgroup has been established to explore solutions. Mr. Kijanski committed to discussing the matter with the workgroup during their next meeting to assess progress and identify potential actions moving forward.

Mr. Ortiz questioned the VSignal tool, emphasizing its importance for data collection. He inquired about the factors that prompted VA to create a specific survey, asking whether Veteran complaints, underutilized benefits, or other triggers drive it. How does VA decide to focus a survey on a particular type of benefit? Mr. Kijanski responded that creating a survey could be triggered by any of the factors Mr. Ortiz mentioned or a combination of them. It could also stem from the administration's desire to understand a particular issue or focus on specific benefit usage. He explained that a formal request is made, and a survey is then developed based on that.

Ms. Gretchen Sierra-Zorita referenced the brief and the mention of Executive Order 14058 (Executive Order on Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government), noting that it is broad and does not specify areas or territories. She posed several questions: How does this compare to how tribes are handled? How are tribes integrated into this process, and what other entities are involved? She also suggested adding flexibility by creating a separate tab or section for the FAS when it becomes active. She emphasized the importance of collecting data, advocating at the state level, and ensuring access to this data to advocate for the FAS effectively. Mr. Kijanski responded, explaining that the office works with tribal support and the Office of Tribal Negotiations. He acknowledged that the executive order is broad regarding Veteran data and what can be shared, and there is uncertainty regarding what can or cannot be disclosed. He agreed that these challenges exist but noted that improvements are possible. Ms. Sierra-Zorita followed up with a recommendation to consider forming a subgroup to address this issue as part of the broader context. She requested that Mr. Kijanski take this suggestion back to the workgroup for further consideration.

## **Briefing On the Role of the Regional Office**

Mr. Pritz Navaratnasingam introduced himself and provided an overview of the benefits and services offered to the Indo-Pacific region, which covers 10 states and 13 regional offices. He emphasized that the VBA is dedicated to ensuring that Veterans in the Pacific region receive the benefits and services they deserve. He outlined key accomplishments, including VBA's delivery of \$187 billion in benefits and \$173 billion in compensation and pension benefits. In fiscal year (FY) 2024, there was a 27% increase in disability claims paid. Outreach efforts to support the PACT Act have been expanded, and PACT Act claims have surpassed 2 million, with a 75% grant rate. Despite these achievements, Mr. Navaratnasingam acknowledged that more work is needed to connect Veterans, survivors, and their families with their benefits.

Mr. Navaratnasingam provided an overview of the Manila Regional Office and the Honolulu Regional Office. The Manila Regional Office (RO) employs 91 staff and has seen significant increases in outreach events, completed hours, and engagements due to the efforts. A Public Contact Team operates a call center, handling virtual and in-person appointments while leading outreach events in the Philippines, Palau, Micronesia, and the Marshall Islands. The Manila office provides services, including the Filipino Veterans Equity Compensation Fund, the Foreign Medical Program, and various specialty care clinics. The Honolulu Regional Office (RO) employs 178 staff and serves around 125,853 Veterans and their families across Hawaii, Guam, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI). The office offers counseling sessions, VA benefit briefings, and other services. Guam benefits from Medical Disability Exam Office (MDEO) exam support, significantly impacting local Veterans. However, Guam, American Samoa, and Saipan lack specialty examiners, requiring Veterans in these areas to travel to Honolulu for such services.

Mr. Navaratnasingam highlighted the ongoing efforts and challenges in reaching and supporting Veterans in the Indo-Pacific region and the importance of expanding outreach and enhancing access to services.

### **Questions and Answers:**

Ms. Tua'au-Glaude' shared her experience of helping establish a clinic in American Samoa two years ago, noting that exams were held in hotel conference rooms before this. She expressed her gratitude to Mr. Navaratnasingam for his informative presentation and the valuable insights provided.

Ms. Libian introduced herself as a representative of the Federated States of Micronesia. She explained that the four island states spread across the vast Pacific face significant challenges due to the long distances between them, resulting in inconsistent VA services, outreach, and communication. She noted that services are inadequate, and VA does not fully understand the isolation of these islands. Ms. Libian shared that it has been approximately three years since any VA services or outreach have been provided to Veterans on Yap, with no visits occurring during that time. She referenced bringing up this issue at last year's meeting in Puerto Rico, where she was assured that a visit would be

scheduled, but nothing has materialized. Ms. Libian asked if VA could consider providing a position at the embassy level or a local staff physician to help support the islands. Mr. Navaratnasingam responded that while he could not commit to a physician or specific position, he could commit to increased outreach in Yap. He mentioned an outreach plan to support Yap and stated that he would follow up with the leadership at the Manila Regional Office regarding this concern. Mr. Navaratnasingam asked for Ms. Libian's contact information to follow up with her on the outreach schedule.

Mr. Benjamin expressed his appreciation for the efforts in the Pacific region and offered a follow-up to Ms. Libian's comments. He inquired more about the outreach efforts, emphasizing that information is power. He highlighted the importance of having a physical VA presence in these areas to provide outreach and education, which would be far more impactful. Specifically, he mentioned that for the CNMI, bringing a PACT Act subject matter expert to educate Veterans would be beneficial. Mr. Navaratnasingam thanked Mr. Benjamin for his comments and stated he would share the feedback with the Regional Office. He asked Mr. Benjamin for additional details on what to include in an outreach plan for the area. Mr. Benjamin suggested increasing registration, offering guidance on how Veterans can register, and improving strategic communication and outreach to reach more Veterans.

Mr. Alexis Martinez stated that he would email his questions to Mr. Navaratnasingam.

### **Briefing On Mailing Prescriptions**

Dr. Gloriann Watson provided an overview of VA Pharmacy Services. The service covers a vast area of over 4.8 million square miles across three time zones and faces unique geographical barriers in providing prescription services. The Honolulu pharmacy operates 24/7, fills over 620,000 outpatient prescriptions annually, ensures continuous service for Veterans, and maintains daily communication with other regions to manage medication shipments effectively.

Dr. Watson outlined that accountability measures and tracking mechanisms are in place to monitor medications in transit. Prescription shipping follows VA directive 1108.07, which allows VA medical facilities and Consolidated Mail Outpatient Pharmacies (CMOP) to ship prescriptions only within the U.S. (including territories like Puerto Rico). However, the Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, and the Marshall Islands are outside the U.S. and are covered by the Foreign Medical Program (FMP).

She explained the differences in processing non-refrigerated and refrigerated medications. Veterans typically receive non-refrigerated medications via the United States Postal Service (USPS), although UPS and FedEx are sometimes used. Delivery times vary, and overnight delivery is not feasible due to shipping distances and water travel. Refrigerated medications follow distinct shipping processes and requirements, which include managing carrier delays and additional challenges that affect the delivery of cold shipping products.

Dr. Watson highlighted that the data reflects a 92.9% trust score in the pharmacy services

provided to Veterans, demonstrating the effectiveness and reliability of VA's pharmacy operations.

#### Questions and Answers:

Ms. Buyum raised concerns about the challenges faced in CNMI and other Pacific islands, where Veterans cannot provide a street address for USPS deliveries and have limited hours to pick up packages. This makes it difficult for Veterans to receive their medications. She also asked why USPS could not be used for shipping to pharmacies or health centers that can store and refrigerate medications, noting that the brief mentioned the lack of a reliable shipping provider in the islands. Dr. Watson explained that once packages are handed over to USPS, VA loses control over the process and tracking. In some areas, USPS does not directly deliver, and contract postal deliveries can cause delays. These delays are particularly problematic for refrigerated items, which are time-sensitive. To address this, they have partnered with Dr. McDermott and his team in Guam, where medications are mailed directly and then redistributed to Saipan. Dr. Watson stated that they are working on establishing a central hub in Guam to streamline the process. She noted that the current process is proving effective and is being continuously refined until a better system is in place.

Ms. Tua'au-Glaude' suggested that, since there is a CBOC and a small pharmacy in American Samoa, rather than using the post office, why not have all Veterans' medications sent directly to the CBOC or pharmacy so Veterans can pick them up there? Dr. Watson acknowledged that this is a concern for American Samoa. She explained that American Samoa was the first location they began sending refrigerated items to the CBOC. Her designated technician is responsible for managing the distribution of refrigerated items, and she believes every flight from Honolulu to American Samoa includes refrigerated cases. Non-refrigerated medications are sent via the post office to avoid clinic overcrowding and maintain a proper chain of custody for controlled substances. This process ensures that medications are tracked and accounted for appropriately.

Mr. Falcam emphasized the significance of this issue, and it is especially important for the FAS. Referring to the brief, which mentioned that the FAS falls under the FMP category, Mr. Falcam asked about the connection between the FMP and pharmaceuticals. Dr. Watson explained that before 2016, medications were provided to Veterans in the FAS. However, Directive 110807 changed this policy, preventing the shipment of medications to the Marshall Islands, Palau, and Micronesia. She noted that efforts are underway with the national team and other groups to find solutions for resuming medication shipments to these regions, but this would require updating the directive. Mr. Falcam followed up by asking for more information on what occurred in 2016 that led to the sudden change in the mailing of medications and the revision of the directive. He also emphasized that the committee report will address this issue and underscore the need for priority attention to improving care for Veterans in the FAS.

Mr. Norvert Yano raised concerns about the inability to mail medications to Palau, questioning why he can receive items when he is in the States but not while in Palau. He

pointed out that there is a daily flight, so that should not be the issue. Dr. Watson acknowledged these concerns, explaining that while they are working on a solution, there is a required process to follow. She mentioned that updates to the language and other necessary changes are in progress but assured him that they understand the importance of addressing this need.

Ms. Sierra-Zorita requested clarification on whether the restriction on mailing medications to certain areas for Veterans is a result of a statute or a waiver. Dr. Watson explained that this is governed by a nationwide VA directive specifying where medications can be shipped. Ms. Adams clarified that the discussed locations, such as those unable to receive medications by mail, are part of ongoing international agreements being reviewed and updated. She noted that these changes are complex and take time to implement.

### **Briefing On Travel Funding**

Mr. Richard Teel provided an overview of the two main transportation networks available to Veterans: Veterans Transportation Services (VTS) and the Beneficiary Travel and Reimbursement program.

Mr. Teel shared performance data highlighting a 242% increase in trips provided over the past two years. The VTS program launched in Guam in October 2023 with a shuttle bus service, and it will expand with an additional shuttle and driver in January 2025. Additionally, VHA Uber Health, a third-party ride-sharing service, is available, and a similar service called Stroll will be added in Guam. These ride-sharing services have been highly effective in transporting veterans to appointments. The VTS program is also expanding to more locations in Hawaii and Guam. Recognizing transportation as a major barrier to care, these expanded services aim to encourage more Veterans to seek the care they need.

Mr. Teel also provided an overview of the Beneficiary Travel and Reimbursement program, which offers preauthorized funding to cover transportation costs for Veterans traveling to healthcare appointments. The program reimburses mileage and other travel expenses to and from VA-approved facilities. Veterans must apply for reimbursement within 30 days of travel through the Beneficiary Travel Self-Service System (BTSSS) or by submitting VA Form 10-3542 online. He emphasized the program's eligibility requirements, noting that while Veterans can seek care at any VA facility, reimbursement is only available for travel to the nearest facility to provide the necessary care. Veterans who choose a facility farther from their homes will be responsible for additional transportation costs.

Mr. Teel summarized the positive impact of these transportation services and reimbursement programs, which have significantly improved healthcare access for Veterans in the Pacific region.

Questions and Answers:

Ms. Tua'au-Glaude' raised concerns about Veterans on smaller islands who must take a



canoe to the main island for exams and care, asking why they are not reimbursed for this travel. Mr. Teel responded that they are currently looking into the issue. He explained the reimbursement process, noting that the benefit covers travel costs, including water taxis, and provided a receipt. As for mileage reimbursement, he mentioned that they are exploring the possibility of using GEO codes to calculate mileage since many addresses are P.O. boxes, and street names often do not match postal codes. He assured her there is a strong commitment to addressing this issue and ensuring that Veterans receive the benefits and reimbursements they are entitled to.

Mr. Falcam asked for clarification from the brief regarding beneficiary travel, specifically when travel expenses are covered and when they are not. Mr. Teel explained that the "nearest facility policy" stipulates that Beneficiary Travel can be reimbursed when a Veteran receives care at the closest facility capable of providing the necessary treatment. However, if the Veteran chooses to travel to a facility further away, they would be responsible for covering the difference in cost.

Mr. Falcam followed up with a comment and a question: He expressed confusion as to why there would be a lack of care if a Veteran requires specialty care. He also asked whether it matters where the Veteran receives primary care or where they are registered. Mr. Teel explained that there are instances where FMP and Beneficiary Travel overlap, such as with interfacility referrals. He emphasized that these details are worth reviewing from the committee's perspective to identify potential improvements.

Mr. Yano shared a specific case of a 100% disabled Veteran in Palau with a severe illness who traveled to Taiwan for care, bringing his family along. However, VA did not cover these travel expenses, and Mr. Yano asked how the Veteran could be reimbursed for these costs. Mr. Teel explained that this situation falls under the FMP, which is outside his jurisdiction. However, he offered to initiate contact and assist in gathering the information needed to help address the reimbursement issue.

Ms. Muna-Barnes noted that Veterans in Guam are frequently referred to Hawaii for care and then to California for further treatment. After seeing the provider in Hawaii, the Veteran returns to Guam to await the processing and approval of the transfer. She inquired about ways to expedite this process and reduce the need for additional travel, suggesting that better coordination could help improve the situation. Mr. Teel explained that the Beneficiary Travel program depends on medical decisions. He suggested that this issue could be discussed with medical staff to explore ways to improve care coordination and streamline the process for the patient, considering their specific needs.

## **Briefing On Telehealth**

Ms. Omayra Brabham provided an overview of the telehealth services available to Veterans. Ms. Brabham emphasized that the VA Pacific Islands Health Care System (VAPIHCS) serves 59,070 Veterans across Hawaii, Guam, American Samoa, and the CNMI. Due to its unique geographical location, spanning three time zones and 12 care sites, telehealth is essential in providing accessible healthcare to Veterans in these regions.

Ms. Brabham provided an overview of telehealth services for Veterans, highlighting two main types: synchronous telehealth, which involves real-time video appointments with providers, and asynchronous telehealth, which allows for the secure collection of clinical data for later review. Veterans also have access to telehealth via VA Mobile Devices, the My Health eVet portal, and VA Mobile Apps, which provide easy access to care, medical records, refills, and communication with providers. The Remote Patient Monitoring program supports high-risk Veterans through nurse case managers, who help coordinate care and manage chronic diseases to ensure these Veterans remain healthy and well-supported, while ATLAS stations offer additional telehealth sites in locations with limited internet connectivity, reducing the need for long-distance travel to VA facilities.

To ensure Veterans receive the support they need, Ms. Brabham shared that the Connected Care Help Desk is available 24/7 to assist with telehealth services, answer questions, and troubleshoot any issues. This resource is vital for helping Veterans navigate the telehealth system and ensuring they continue to receive the care they deserve.

#### Questions and Answers:

Mr. Martinez asked about the availability of crisis care and how Veterans can access telehealth services when emergency care is needed. Ms. Brabham responded that VA has established telehealth service agreements and follows the national telehealth emergency process. If an emergency arises during a telehealth visit and e911 is activated, specific protocols are in place to ensure Veterans receive the immediate care they need. Mr. Benjamin raised concerns about scheduling issues reported by Veterans in the region. He asked about the mechanisms being used for scheduling, noting that feedback indicates online scheduling does not account for time zone differences, showing appointments in the provider's time zone rather than the Veteran's. Ms. Brabham responded that this is an important issue, and VA is developing training for schedulers at the national level to address this concern.

#### **Tour – VA Guam CBOC**

Closed session.

#### **Briefing On VA Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs**

Ms. Adams provided an overview of VA's Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs (IGA), detailing its efforts to improve services for Veterans in the Pacific region. In 2021, a Senior Advisor for Pacific Strategy was appointed to coordinate activities across the VBA, VHA, and the National Cemetery Administration (NCA). The office's primary goals include strengthening partnerships, implementing the COFA Amendment, and improving outreach coordination across VA.

Ms. Adams highlighted ongoing efforts to serve Veterans in Hawaii and the Pacific territories through VBA and PIHCS. She provided updates on the COFA Amendments Act of 2023, improvements in VHA services in Guam, and the establishment of the Center for

Pacific Islander Veterans Health (CPIVH) in Honolulu. Other key developments include the updated Pacific Islander Veterans Outreach Booklet and the Veteran Experience Action Center Events.

Ms. Adams concluded by discussing the importance of Veteran Service Officers' accreditation, which is necessary for assisting Veterans. She encouraged those interested in helping Veterans to complete the accreditation process.

Finally, Ms. Adams announced Ms. Nelson's promotion from Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Operations to Executive Director of Indo-Pacific Veterans Affairs.

Questions and Answers:

Ms. Tua'au-Glaude' mentioned that while she is not accredited, she assists Veterans in American Samoa and inquired whether this could pose an ethical issue. Ms. Adams clarified that she should not continue providing this assistance as an SGE. An SGE cannot represent another party on behalf of VA. Ms. Adams emphasized that obtaining accreditation is crucial to complying with ethical guidelines and giving Ms. Tua'au-Glaude' greater authority and influence when advocating for Veterans with VA.

Mr. Ortiz inquired about VA's limitations in advocating for Veterans' benefits at the state government level, referencing a controversial report in Puerto Rico regarding Veterans' disability pay and its taxation. Ms. Adams recommended that the issue be directed to her office, as they frequently handle concerns and complaints from Veterans. She explained that her office works closely with OGC and other relevant departments when necessary. Ms. Adams also noted that they have collaborated with Governors, state officials, and even Mayors to research and address Veterans' inquiries.

### **Committee Discussion**

Mr. Kaneko thanked everyone for the valuable briefs and information shared during the meeting. He acknowledged the effort and insight provided by all participants. He then announced that the remainder of the session would be dedicated to working sessions for the subcommittees, allowing for focused collaboration and further discussion on the key issues. This time would be used to address specific tasks and refine the details of the committee's draft report and work moving forward.

### **Day Closeout / Updates / Reminders**

Mr. Kaneko provided an overview of the agenda for Day 3.

### **Adjournment**

Mr. Kaneko acknowledged the participants called for a motion to adjourn.

### **Meeting Adjourned**

**Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)**  
**Advisory Committee on Outlying Areas and Freely Associated States**  
Meeting Minutes  
December 12, 2024  
6:00 a.m. - 10:30 a.m. Chamorro Standard Time

**Attending Committee Members:**

- Kalani Kaneko, Chair, Marshall Islands
- Fa'alagiga Nina Tua'au-Glaude', Vice-Chair, American Samoa
- Alex Ortiz, Puerto Rico
- Alexis Martinez, Puerto Rico
- Arielle Buyum, Northern Mariana Islands
- Norvert Yano, Palau
- Mercedes Libian, Federated States of Micronesia
- Swinston Siba, Federated States of Micronesia
- Leo Falcam, Federated States of Micronesia
- James Kennedy Benjamin, Northern Mariana Islands
- Vincent Borja, Guam
- Tina Rose Muna-Barnes, Guam

**Ex-officio Members Present:**

- John Brewer, Department of Interior

**Other VA Leadership and Staff:**

- Zaneta Adams, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Intergovernmental Affairs, Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs (OPIA)
- RimaAnn Nelson, Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Operations
- Melissa Cohen, Executive Director, Outreach, Transition, and Economic Development (OTED)
- Ronald Walters, Under Secretary of Memorial Affairs
- Adam Kijanski, Veterans Experience Office (VEO), Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA)
- Andrew Szymczak, Program Management Officer, Integrated External Networks
- Richard Teel, Veterans Transportation Program, VHA
- Jerry Sowders, Executive Assistant, Cemetery Operations
- Bernard Johnson, Designated Federal Officer (DFO), OTED
- Ferdinand Torres-Leon, Alternate DFO, OTED
- Donald Harbert, Management Analyst, OTED
- Jelessa M. Burney, Program Specialist, ACOMO
- Pritz Navaratnasingam, Pacific District Office Director
- Ada Clark, Network Director, VA Sierra Pacific Network (VISN 21)
- Dr. Kevin McDermott, VA Guam Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC)

- Amy Rohlf, Public Affairs Office (PAO) (VISN 21)
- Armenthis Lester, Public Affairs Specialist
- James Ingebredtder, VA Pacific Islands Healthcare System
- Christine Kramer, VA Pacific Islands Healthcare System
- April Seghorn, VA Pacific Islands Healthcare System
- Katherine Cassell, Veteran Services Officer
- Devin Woods, Associate Director, VA Pacific Islands Health Care System
- Donald Banik, Deputy Chief of Staff, VA Pacific Islands Health Care System
- Katherine Pope, Nurse Executive, VA Pacific Islands Health Care System
- Tanya Eubanks, Guam Office of Veteran Services
- Michael Thompson, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
- Danica Pinson, Health Care Specialist, VA Pacific Islands Health Care System
- Sedra Graves, Health System Specialist, VA Pacific Islands Health Care System

**Also Present:**

- Gretchen Sierra-Zorita, Director for Puerto Rico and Territories, Office of Intergovernmental Affairs
- Director Hainrick Panuelo, FSM National Office of Veterans Affairs
- Sabrins Salas Matanane, Guam Legislature
- Roger Keen
- Jaime Matthews
- Andre Glaude'
- Greg Ngirmang
- Victor Milam, Joint Task Force Micronesia
- Frederick Haerter, United States Army Pacific
- Eddy Ruiz
- Genelyn Paz
- Bobbie Taitano
- John Taitano
- Anthony Tajjeron
- Alan Cipedes
- Aran Romain
- Julian Bordallo
- Corinna Ballesta
- Tom Ada
- Stella Gabriel
- Anthony O'Bryant
- Marlene Tolliver
- Vicki Shambaugh
- Stephen Amaguin
- Edison Andres

- Gregorio Andres Jr.
- Ben Andres
- Sylvia Sheck
- Tina Matano

### **Thursday, December 12, 2024 Opening Remarks**

Mr. Johnson welcomed all attendees and formally opened the meeting, outlining the day's agenda, including the 30-minute public comment period.

Mr. Kaneko expressed his sincere appreciation for everyone's attendance and active participation throughout the week. He also recognized the dedication and hard work of the DFO, team members, and fellow committee members, extending his gratitude for their unwavering commitment.

Ms. Tua'au-Glaude' also shared her gratitude, noting the valuable insights she had gained, and expressed her intention to bring this important information back to Veterans.

### **Observations from Guam CBOC and Open Discussion**

Committee members shared their experiences and insights from the visit to the Guam CBOC, reflecting on the challenges and successes observed during the tour. They discussed various aspects of the facility's operations, including access to care, patient services, and the overall effectiveness of the CBOC in meeting the needs of Veterans. Mr. Falcam requested clarification regarding an edit to the draft report, noting that an issue that required further discussion had arisen. He proposed that time be set aside later in the meeting for the committee to address this matter. The chair approved the motion to allocate time for the discussion later in the meeting.

Mr. Ortiz expressed his gratitude to the VA team, thanking them for their hard work and dedication to Veterans. He mentioned that the visit the previous day was truly eye-opening, and he acknowledged the significant progress Dr. McDermott has made and its impact on improving services and support for Veterans in the region. The accomplishments at the facility are invaluable, and Mr. Ortiz said he now has a deeper understanding after experiencing it firsthand. After the meeting, he expressed a desire to collaborate with Dr. McDermott to explore how some of the successful processes in Guam could be applied in Puerto Rico.

Mr. Ortiz also took a moment to appreciate the efforts of the VA healthcare system, VBA, and NCA, urging national VSOs to increase their advocacy and continue to highlight these important initiatives. He concluded by congratulating Dr. McDermott and the CBOC for the outstanding work they are doing for local Veterans.

Ms. Muna-Barnes began by thanking everyone for their presence. She emphasized the importance of ensuring that the benefits earned by our military are accessible and equitable for all Veterans, particularly in this region. She reflected on the positive experience of hosting the annual meeting, expressing her joy and appreciation that everyone traveled to be there. Ms. Muna-Barnes concluded by thanking the committee for their hard work and contributions.

Mr. Borja expressed his appreciation for the meeting in Guam, noting the effort it took to bring everyone here. He is confident that the committee's efforts will have a meaningful impact and drive positive change. Drawing from his experience with VA services, he shared that he has witnessed improvements and remains optimistic about continued progress.

Mr. Falcam began by expressing his sincere gratitude to the VA team for their hard work, noting that the briefs presented during the meeting were both insightful and valuable. He thanked the government officials and special guests who attended throughout the week. Mr. Falcam also acknowledged the presence of the public attendees, both in person and virtually, highlighting how important they are to ensuring Veterans are properly supported. He emphasized how significant it is for the FSM to be included in these discussions to improve services for Veterans.

Mr. Yano thanked Mr. Ortiz and Ms. Buyum for organizing the report and consolidating the individual contributions. He recognized the significant amount of hard work and dedication in the process.

Mr. Martinez acknowledged the experience and dedication in the room, emphasizing that while Veterans from territories face unique challenges, they still deserve the same care and attention. He noted that VA often overlooks these issues but stressed that the committee's role is to prevent that. He urged the group to act quickly and ensure their report reaches the SECVA, stating, "We are going to make a difference, and it has to happen now."

### **Briefing On NCA Initiatives and Updates**

Mr. Glenn Powers provided an overview of the NCA's mission: to honor Veterans and their families by providing dignified final resting places in national shrines and ensuring lasting tributes commemorating their service and sacrifice.

Mr. Powers outlined the NCA's priorities, which include creating a workplace where every employee feels respected and valued, maintaining national cemeteries as shrines to properly memorialize our nation's heroes, and working toward 95% coverage for all Veterans. He also highlighted ongoing efforts to cultivate relationships with state, territorial, and tribal cemeteries.

He provided key statistics about the NCA's efforts, highlighting the maintenance of 155 National cemeteries and over 4.26 million graves. Mr. Powers also detailed the eligibility

process, ensuring that Veterans and their families have the necessary documentation and records for burial eligibility.

In addition to traditional headstones and markers, Mr. Powers highlighted the extensive range of burial and memorial benefits available to Veterans, such as burial flags, presidential memorial certificates, medallions, commemorative urns or plaques, and online legacy memorials to honor and remember loved ones.

He emphasized the vital role of the NCA and the significance of its benefits, expressing pride in the NCA's work and achievements. Mr. Powers highlighted that the NCA employs more than 2,000 staff members, with 65% of them being Veterans. A key goal for the NCA is to enhance access to burial services, ensuring that Veterans can be laid to rest in a national, state, or tribal cemetery within 75 miles of their homes.

He also highlighted the Veterans Cemetery Grants program, which has provided over \$1 billion in funding for cemetery construction, leading to the expansion of state, tribal, and territorial cemeteries, including 14 tribal Veterans' cemeteries.

Mr. Powers summarized the burial benefits available to Veterans in the FAS and other outlying areas, recognizing that some regions still lack access to certain benefits.

Questions and Answers:

Ms. Tua'au-Glaude' stated that American Samoa does not have a cemetery; why isn't there a national or grant-funded cemetery in American Samoa? Mr. Powers explained that an application can be submitted to request a grant-funded cemetery. However, the process that NCA follows is if there is funding, the approval of the application is based on the number of unserved Veterans in that area. That may be why American Samoa does not have one now. Mr. Powers said he would check whether American Samoa has applied for a grant-funded cemetery and follow up on its status.

Ms. Tua'au-Glaude' asked whether the Navy still offers burial at sea for Veterans who choose to do so. Mr. Powers responded that burial at sea is still provided. He added that in these cases, since the Veteran's remains are determined to be unavailable, the memorial headstone is available and could be placed. Mr. Powers advised contacting the Department of the Navy for additional information. He stated that he would provide a link for the committee members.

Mr. Benjamin inquired about the medallions, asking if there is a time limit for families to request one for a Veteran who has been buried for 20, 30, or even 40 years. If the grave is marked with a private marker, Mr. Powers confirmed that a medallion can still be provided, regardless of time.

Mr. Ortiz suggested that contracting temporary workers could be a useful solution to assist during and after natural disasters, helping to prevent VA employees from becoming overburdened and burned out with burial services. Mr. Powers responded by



explaining that there is a system in place where federal employees can be "deployed" to disaster areas to provide support as needed.

Mr. Ortiz inquired whether VA has mechanics who perform maintenance and upkeep of the equipment used at the cemeteries or if this is contracted out. Mr. Powers stated he would contact the Puerto Rico government, which runs the State Cemetery in Puerto Rico, and Mr. Nieves, Director of the Puerto Rico National Cemetery.

## **Public Comments**

Mr. Torres-Leon opened the meeting for public comments.

Mr. Greg Nairmang, President of the Palau Veteran Association, expressed his heartfelt thanks for the work being done and recognized the importance of the past three days of discussions and progress. Mr. Nairmang shared that since the formation of the Palau Veteran Association in 2019, they have received significant support from the DoD. He took the opportunity to publicly acknowledge and express his appreciation for the DoD's continued assistance, which has been crucial in advancing the needs of Veterans in Palau.

Ms. Corina Ballesta, U.S. Air Force Veteran, Vice President of the Veteran Non-profit Organization HMI, and Co-host of the radio show *Veterans with Benefits*, began her remarks with a quote in her native language, which translated to "The Way, the Truth, and the Light."

Ms. Ballesta addressed the committee and the SECVA, saying, "Today, we find ourselves at a critical moment for Veterans residing in U.S. Outlying Areas and Freely Associated States. The challenges we face—limited access to care, insufficient funding, and bureaucratic barriers—are not just statistics; they are daily realities for those who have served our nation." Ms. Ballesta explained how her organization, the non-profit HMI Guam, surveys local Veterans to identify their most pressing issues. The survey results revealed concerns around healthcare access, travel off the island, claims assistance, and outreach efforts, among other topics. She noted that the full report was sent to Mr. Johnson and emphasized that these are real and urgent issues for Veterans.

Ms. Ballesta also addressed comments made earlier by Ms. Rohlf regarding the increase in VHA enrollment in Guam. While Ms. Ballesta agreed that outreach efforts in Guam are progressing, she stressed the importance of meeting Veterans where they live. Through her organization, they go directly into the villages to conduct outreach and hold monthly benefit boot camps. These three-day events offer comprehensive education and direct assistance to Veterans. She requested that CBOC staff participate in these efforts to provide more effective support.

Additionally, Ms. Ballesta invited everyone to the upcoming Veterans Symposium on August 7-9, 2025. She proposed a program to address immediate needs, offer data analysis, and produce reports to ensure Veterans receive the access and support they deserve.

Mr. Eddy Reyes, a U.S. Air Force Veteran and member of the Guam Veterans Task Force, shared key recommendations that he and the Task Force developed and delivered to Mr. Johnson. These recommendations focus on ensuring more targeted and dedicated funding for the U.S. Outlying Areas and Freely Associated States and fostering public-private partnerships with non-profit Veteran organizations to enhance services. Mr. Reyes highlighted that the FY 2025 VA budget amounts to \$369 billion, a \$32 billion increase from FY 2024. However, despite thorough research, he could not find specific details about how much of this budget is allocated to the Outlying Areas and Freely Associated States. Mr. Reyes emphasized that the SECVA has tasked the committee with identifying innovative solutions to address this funding gap and ensure these regions receive the vital support they need.

Mr. Andre Tua'au-Glaude', a retired Veteran from American Samoa, expressed his gratitude for the opportunity to provide input and thanked the committee for their dedication to serving covered Veterans. He also extended his appreciation to U.S. Congress and the SECVA for recognizing the underserved status of Veterans in U.S. territories and the Freely Associated States, who often do not receive the same level of care or access to benefits as those on the mainland.

Mr. Tua'au-Glaude' requested that the Pacific region receive an aircraft that could be used as a shuttle service to transport Veterans to necessary medical care and treatments. This aircraft would also transport medications, durable medical equipment, and VA outreach teams between the mainland and the islands. He stressed the importance of educating VA leadership about the unique challenges faced by Veterans living in U.S. Territories and Freely Associated States, highlighting the significant differences between these groups and Veterans on the mainland.

Stephan Amaguin, a retired Veteran from Guam, expressed his appreciation for the committee's work, recognizing the presence of two members from Guam. He emphasized the importance of Guam and the need to give equal attention to its Veterans. He called for ambitious goals, including establishing a VA hospital, while recognizing the hard work and dedication of the CBOC and its employees, for which he is deeply grateful.

Mr. Amaguin acknowledged service improvements, sharing a recent positive experience when he contacted the Veteran Task Force. He was pleased with the responsiveness, noting that someone answered his call, and when he called again, they followed up to ensure he was okay. He concluded by thanking everyone for their ongoing efforts to improve services for Veterans.

Mr. Anthony Taijeron, Veteran, President of the Veteran Non-profit Organization HMI, and Co-host of the radio show *Veterans with Benefits*, began with the following quotes.

“Words are like arrows, once let loose there's no coming back”

“Be kind to everyone you meet, for everyone is fighting a battle you know nothing about”

“Be careful of your thoughts, for they become words, be careful of your words for they become actions, Be care of your actions for they become your character”

“People may forget what you said, people may forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel”

We hope that we made you feel honored to be here in Guam to help all our Veterans and the Veterans in this area.

Mr. Taijeron continued, “Good morning, and hello to you all. I am happy that you are here today in this place at this event. You are here on the land of the Chamorro people; for so many years, our ancestors fought for their homeland and for their rights. Let us not continue to fight for the rights of their descendants who are Veterans. Honorable Secretary, committee members, VA employees, fellow Veterans, everyone here, and those watching virtually, we stand before you today in the year of the Veteran in the most patriotic place in the United States; we are here not to discuss, not to analyze, but to act. Our Veterans in Outlying Areas and Freely Associated States have waited far too long; they have endured systemic barriers, geographical isolation, and bureaucratic inertia that have robbed them of timely, comprehensive support. Today, we present not just a plan but a commitment, a commitment to change, to serve, and to support. The stark reality of the changes is clear: Veterans in remote areas face fragmented healthcare access, limited mental health resources, economic instability, and isolation from critical support networks, but challenges are not obstacles; they are opportunities for transformative action, our needed strategy – action now. Refine continuously we propose a revolutionary approach, immediate support, rapid, flexible intervention, continuous improvement, collaborative ecosystems with non-profit organizations, funding, and lifeline support, we cannot solve problems without resources, our strategy includes expedited funding mechanisms, performance-based grants, public-private partnerships, transparent, rapid allocation processes, a living breathing solution, our approach is not a static document, it’s a living strategy that will deploy initial support immediately, refine within 30 days, optimize within 60, continuously adapt based on Veteran feedback, a timeline of transformation month zero, emergency protocols activated, our Veterans have given everything today, we give them our unwavering commitment. Thank you.”

Director Hainrick Panuelo, from the FSM National Office of Veteran Affairs, expressed his gratitude to the committee for the outstanding work done so far. He mentioned that during the past few days, one word has particularly stood out about the committee's efforts for the U.S. Outlying Areas and Freely Associated States: discretionary. He pointed out that the work being carried out is authorized by a single person—the SECVA—and with upcoming changes in administration and a new SECVA appointee, he questioned how these changes might impact the progress made so far.

He stated that the word “discretionary” poses a risk, and as a challenge to the committee, he urged them to work towards changing it. While he acknowledged and

appreciated the efforts, Mr. Panuelo emphasized that much more must be done. He urged the committee to remove the term "discretionary" from their framework moving forward. Sergeant Major Frederick Haerter, Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Deputy Commanding General of the U.S. Army Pacific, shared his perspective, noting that his team frequently visits the U.S. Outlying Areas and Freely Associated States as part of their portfolio. He emphasized the challenges posed by the "tyranny of distance," stating that everything is more difficult in these regions.

Sergeant Major Haerter drew a comparison to the recruitment process, explaining that just as recruiters invest considerable time and resources in making multiple visits to enlist new service members, the same level of effort should be applied to supporting soldiers as they return to their home countries and territories.

Sergeant Major Haerter stressed the need for improved transition support for service members returning to the COFA areas. He pointed out that it is crucial to identify those transitioning to these areas and ensure they follow the proper steps, utilizing their available resources. He expressed his hope for improved collaboration between DoD and VA to address these challenges.

Sergeant Major Victor Milam, from Joint Task Force - Micronesia, discussed the challenges of operating in the region, particularly in relation to distance and time. He identified three key regional areas that DoD focuses on: people, training, and logistics. He emphasized the need for innovative solutions and the efficient use of existing resources. One of his key recommendations was to focus on certifying and training personnel at the point of need, asking how more individuals can be trained to assist Veterans, especially in the U.S. Outlying areas and Freely Associated States. Sergeant Major Milam called for immediate action and highlighted the importance of collaboration between the DoD, VA, and industry partners to tackle these issues.

Sylvia Sheck, a U.S. Army Veteran and Board President of the Marshallese Veterans Alliance, a non-profit organization based in Washington State, began by congratulating everyone on the success of the advisory committee meeting. She shared that there have been many valuable takeaways from the meeting and expressed how much she has learned.

Ms. Sheck explained that the Marshallese Veterans Alliance (NVA) was established earlier this year with a board of directors comprising Veterans from the Marshall Islands. She emphasized the organization's mission to provide support, resources, and advocacy for Veterans.

Ms. Sheck stated that NVA is eager to establish a rapport with committee members and others from these regions and is here to help. Her mission is for NVA to serve as a bridge, helping to support the committee in meeting its goals. (website: [www.marshalleseva.org](http://www.marshalleseva.org))

Mr. Torres-Leon concluded the public comments.

### **Calendar Discussion**

Ms. Tua'au-Glaude' opened the discussion on calendar review, schedule, and location for the next annual committee (in-person) meeting. The committee members discussed the 2025 yearly in-person meeting and shared thoughts on the location.

Committee members motioned for the location to be Washington, DC. An additional option is Hawaii. Locations will be compared, and a recommendation will be provided to VA leadership after completing a decision matrix. The 2025 annual meeting will likely be held in July or August.

Mr. Torres-Leon established the January subcommittee dates.

- Pacific Subcommittee: January 9, 2025, at 7:00 pm
- Administrative Subcommittee: January 15, 2025, at 7:00 pm
- Caribbean Subcommittee: January 16, 2025, at 6:00 pm
- FAS Subcommittee: January 31, 2025, at 7:00 pm

### **Day Closeout / Updates / Reminders**

Ms. Burney addressed the committee, expressing her appreciation for the successful meeting and commending everyone for their passion and commitment to serving Veterans. She urged the committee to consider the public feedback shared during the meeting as they work toward finalizing the report.

Ms. Burney reminded the committee that the report will be submitted to the SECVA and Congress. She outlined the next steps for the committee's report, stating that the subcommittees will submit their reports to the Administrative Subcommittee for review and completion. Afterward, the Administrative Subcommittee will send the report to the full parent committee for further review. She suggested a public meeting be scheduled, ideally for February, during which the committee will vote on the report. The public meeting requires a Notice of Meeting, and a quorum must be present. Once the committee votes in the public forum, the report will be sent to the VA and undergo their vetting and approval process.

Ms. Burney noted that the committee's sunset date, as outlined in the committee charter, is 2032. She emphasized that even after the report is submitted, the work does not stop. Subcommittees will continue to meet, develop new ideas, and make further recommendations for improvement. She stressed the need to ensure that both Congress and VA understand the significance of the committee's work.

Regarding member term limits, Ms. Burney encouraged any members leaving the committee to assist in identifying passionate individuals dedicated to improving access and care for Veterans. She also reminded the committee that the budget information is available in the Charter.

Finally, Ms. Burney emphasized the importance of staying engaged as committee members by attending meetings, participating actively, and contributing to discussions. She reminded everyone that the committee speaks with one voice and one consensus, and it is crucial that they work together as a unified group.

Ms. Buyum noted the importance of committee members' terms and the process of referring new candidates to join. She urged that any potential members be made aware that this is a working committee and encouraged the committee to seek out individuals who are not only committed but also deeply passionate about the cause.

Mr. Johnson outlined the process for appointing committed members, noting that submissions are reviewed and a vote is conducted to finalize selections. He explained that recommendations have been made regarding the location for the next meeting, but a decision matrix is required, which is then submitted for approval.

Mr. Johnson emphasized the importance of attending subcommittee meetings, highlighting that a quorum is required for these sessions. Mr. Johnson concluded by expressing gratitude for everyone's time and participation throughout the week.

Ms. Libian clarified some geographical confusion regarding her representation on the committee. She explained that she represents the FSM within the larger Micronesian region.

Mr. Kaneko provided closing remarks and summarized that this committee's success relies on the collaboration and work of all members.

Mr. Kaneko delivered the closing remarks, emphasizing that the committee's success hinges on all its members' collective efforts and collaboration. He highlighted the importance of working together, acknowledging that everyone's contributions are essential to achieving the committee's goals and making a meaningful impact on Veterans.

## **Adjournment**

Mr. Kaneko acknowledged the participants' call for a motion to adjourn.

## **Meeting Adjourned**

/s/Kalani Kaneko  
Committee Chair

/s/Bernard Johnson  
Designated Federal Officer