

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
Advisory Committee on the Readjustment of Veterans

November 07-09, 2023
811 Vermont Avenue, Conference RM 3166 Washington, D.C.
(In-Person & Virtual: Webex Platform)
8:00AM – 5:00PM (EST)

MINUTES

Tuesday, November 07, 2023:

Attendees:

Committee Members Present:

Joseph Anderson
Viviana Marcotte
David Duren
Khamkay Chitaphong
Cheryl Jacobs
Terry Schow
Heather Nystrom
Gregg Orto
John Castles

Department of Veterans Affairs Staff Present:

Richard Barbato, Designated Federal Officer
Amanda Baker, Assistant Designated Federal Officer
Michael Fisher, Chief Officer, Readjustment Counseling Service
Tanya Bradsher, Deputy Secretary, Department of Veterans Affairs
Pete Ortiz, Deputy Chief Officer, Readjustment Counseling Service
Kevin Swallow, Acting Operations Officer, Readjustment Counseling Service
Jessica Schiefer, Communications Officer, Readjustment Counseling Service

Public Attendees:

Heather Salazar, RAND.
Benjamin Patton, Patton Veterans Project.

Opening Remarks:

At 08:00 a.m., Designated Federal Officer Richard Barbato welcomed the Committee members, initiated with housekeeping items for the building and Conference Room Space (811 Vermont, Conference RM 3166). He then invited members of the public to introduce themselves for the record. Members of the public introduced themselves.

Committee Chair Joseph Anderson called the Committee to order, and provided an

overview of the meeting, took roll call to establish quorum, introduced ideas for future meetings including the next face-to-face session in February 2023 and four potential site visit locations to be determined.

Presentation:

At 08:15AM the Chief Officer of Readjustment Counseling Service, Michael Fisher, provided a Welcome and remarks to the Committee. Mr. Fisher also spoke to two main focal areas for the committee to consider in shaping their recommendations, which were: 1.) Organizations RCS should consider partnering with to provide visibility of an access to RCS services. 2.) Professional organizations across the Nation that could be leveraged and serve as potential pipelines for new Vet Center staff. The Chief Officer then opened up for a Question-and-Answer block, there were no questions from the Committee at that time.

Presentation:

At 08:30AM DFO Barbato led the Committee in a review of the Committee Objectives and Charter. He also provided an overview of the Committee Report process moving forward. He further re-capped the administrative meeting that had been held JUL 2023, and finally, reviewed the VA response to the 23rd Committee Report.

Committee members then introduced themselves and provided some background and biographical information on themselves.

Presentation:

At 0900HRS the Committee received a presentation from the Readjustment Counseling Service (RCS) Deputy Chief Officer, Pete Ortiz on updates from the Office of Clinical policy and oversight, which included an overview of Readjustment counseling, the Structure of the RCS Office of Policy and Oversight, and the vet center Inspection Program.

At 0920HRS the Committee received a presentation Jessica Schiefer, Communications Officer, Readjustment Counseling Service, presented to the Committee on current projects the RCS Communications office had been working on, to include the completed branding operation and increased awareness that has resulted. Next, Ms. Schiefer covered the national outreach plan, which included increased partnerships with Veteran Service Organizations, the Department of defense and other state and Federal

government agencies. Ms. Schiefer went on to speak to targeted outreach, which included the multi-faceted approach being taken.

Ms. Schiefer then covered the process for strategic partnerships that the RCS Communications office was following in their efforts moving forward.

At 0930HRS the Committee received a presentation from Amanda Baker, Management Analyst from the RCS Strategy & Analysis Office on service location analysis: The Vet Center Demand Projection model.

At 1000HRS the Committee received a presentation from Richard Barbato, Client and Employee Experience Officer for Readjustment Counseling Service on VSignals (Customer Feedback results).

Questions from Committee members included: No questions were brought forward.

Presentation:

At 1030HRS EST the Committee then received a presentation from Kelly Shaul, Director of National Strategic Partnerships at the T.A.P.S. organization (Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors). Ms. Shaul covered that TAPS is the national nonprofit organization providing compassionate care and comprehensive resources for all those grieving the death of a military or veteran loved one. Ms. Shaul commented on the working collaborative relationship with Readjustment Counseling Service and T.A.P.S.

She further explained in detail the different ways Since TAPS has provided comfort and hope 24/7 through a national peer support network and connection to grief resources, all at no cost to surviving families and loved ones.

Questions from Committee members included: No questions were brought forward.

The committee then adjourned for a fifteen-minute break. The committee re-convened after the fifteen-minute break.

Presentation:

At 1115HRS EST the Committee then received a presentation from Dr. Paul Cordts, Deputy Assistant Director Medical Affairs for the Defense Health Agency (DHA). Dr. Cordts presented on the separation history and physical exam (SHPE) diagnoses, the Integrated Disability Evaluation system (IDES), the wounded warrior / recovery coordination program and finally, presented on the In-Transition program.

Questions from Committee members included: No questions were brought forward.
The committee then adjourned for lunch. The committee re-convened after lunch.

Committee Discussion: at 1300HRS the Committee then reviewed the VA response to the 23rd Report submitted, specifically round recommendations made to the various offices withing VA.

Executive Presentation:

At 1400HRS EST Ms. Tanya Bradsher, the VA Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Provided remarks and information regarding the Transitioning service members, the PACT Act, Survivor Benefits, and requested that the Committee assist with finding ways to get the word out about Vet centers. The DEPSECVA further spoke to the VA portion of the VA / DoD Transtition Assistance Program, as it is a one day portion, inquired as to whether there was a better structure / configuration for transitioning service members. Questions from Committee members included:

Q: Joseph Anderson: "What does career progression look like within VA for employees?"

The committee then adjourned for a fifteen-minute break. The committee re-convened after the fifteen-minute break.

Presentation:

At 1515HRS EST the Committee then received a presentation from Babs Chase, Coalition Director, Face the Fight, a collaborative effort of corporations, foundations, nonprofits, and veteran-focused organizations joined together to raise awareness and support for suicide prevention. Ms. Chase then covered the key components of the effort, which included Public Health campaign, Grant-Making and Coalition efforts involving cross-sector collaboration..

Questions from Committee members included: No questions were brought forward.

Presentation:

At 1545HRS EST Kevin Swallow, Acting Operations Officer, Readjustment Counseling Service, presented to the Committee on current projects the Operations office had been working on, to include:

- Staffing Model Project
- Current Approaches to Recruitment
- Current Challenges
- Strategic Staffing Plan

Mr. Swallow went on to re-enforce that RCS has continued to collaborate with Workforce Management and Consulting (WMC) and the Office of Information and Technology (OIT) to address counselor staffing needs of Vet Centers. This project was launched in response to findings from a 2020 Government Accountability Office Report on Counselor productivity expectations.

Questions from Committee members included: No questions were brought forward.

Committee Discussion:

The Committee then conducted discussion of each of the morning's presentations by category, key take-aways were identified, and Committee 24th report recommendations began to emerge and take shape.

The committee then adjourned for a fifteen-minute break. The committee re-convened after the fifteen-minute break.

Committee Chair Joseph Anderson re-capped the days presentations and covered what would be heard from the next day.

The Committee adjourned at 1700HRS EST

Wednesday, November 08, 2023:

Attendees:

Committee Members Present:

Joseph Anderson
Viviana Marcotte
David Duren
Khamkay Chitaphong
Cheryl Jacobs
Terry Schow
Heather Nystrom
Gregg Orto
John Castles

Department of Veterans Affairs Staff Present:

Richard Barbato, Designated Federal Officer
Amanda Baker, Assistant Designated Federal Officer
Michael Fisher, Chief Officer, Readjustment Counseling Service
Pete Ortiz, Deputy Chief Officer, Readjustment Counseling Service
Kevin Swallow, Acting Operations Officer, Readjustment Counseling Service
Jessica Schiefer, Communications Officer, Readjustment Counseling Service

Public Attendees:

Heather Salazar, RAND.
Benjamin Patton, Patton Veterans Project.
Jackson Haney, Office of Senator Jon Tester, Montana

Opening Remarks:

At 0800HRS, Designated Federal Officer Richard Barbato welcomed the Committee members, initiated with housekeeping items. He invited members of the public to introduce themselves for the record.

Members of the public introduced themselves.

At 0830HRS EST Committee Chair Joseph Anderson called the Committee to order, and provided an overview of the meeting, took roll call to establish quorum. Committee Chair Joseph Anderson then provided a re-cap of the previous days presentations and reviewed the agenda for the day with the committee.

Presentation:

At 0850HRS EST Christina Zais, Assistant Director for the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Office of Outreach, Transition and Economic Development (OTED), presented to the Committee on the VA – DoD TAP program. Overview included TAP interagency governance, curriculum delivery modalities, the Military Life Cycle module and women's health transition training.

Questions from Committee members included:

No Questions from the Committee were brought forward.

Presentation:

At 0930HRS EST RADM Matthew Kleiman, US Assistant Surgeon General, National Guard Bureau (NGB), presented on challenges and barriers to overcoming the provision of mental health care to members of the National Guard. RADM Kleiman reviewed the National Guard organizational structure, as well as NGB mental health strategic priorities & initiatives.

Questions from Committee members included:

G. Orto: How can VA better partner with National Guard elements to ensure mental health needs are met?

The committee then adjourned for a fifteen-minute break.

The committee re-convened after the fifteen-minute break.

Presentation:

At 1030HRS Juliana Hallows from the VA Office of Mental Health and suicide Prevention, presented to the committee on the current state of Suicide Prevention within VA, to include current state, past initiatives, current initiatives and the future state of Suicide Prevention efforts within the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Questions from Committee members included: None from the committee.

Presentation:

At 1110HRS EST Barbara Morton, the Deputy Experience Office for VA – presented to the Committee on the evolution of the VA Veteran Experience Office, current projects and initiatives, and ways that VEO collaborates with Readjustment Counseling Service and other peripheral elements in VA.

Questions from Committee members included:

Q: Joseph Anderson: How can we improve our recommendation format to improve actionable recommendations?

The committee then adjourned for Lunch. The committee re-convened after Lunch.

Committee Discussion:

The Committee then conducted re-cap discussion of each of the morning's presentations by category, key take-aways were identified, and Committee 24th report recommendations began to emerge and take shape.

The committee then adjourned for a fifteen-minute break. The committee re-convened after the fifteen-minute break.

Committee Chair Joseph Anderson re-capped the days presentations and covered what would be heard from the next day.

The Committee adjourned at 1700HRS EST

Thursday, November 09, 2023:

Attendees:

Committee Members Present:

Joseph Anderson
Viviana Marcotte
David Duren
Khamkay Chitaphong
Cheryl Jacobs
Terry Schow
Heather Nystrom
Gregg Orto
John Castles

Department of Veterans Affairs Staff Present:

Richard Barbato, Designated Federal Officer
Amanda Baker, Assistant Designated Federal Officer
Michael Fisher, Chief Officer, Readjustment Counseling Service
Pete Ortiz, Deputy Chief Officer, Readjustment Counseling Service
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Jessica Schiefer, Communications Officer, Readjustment Counseling Service

Public Attendees:

Heather Salazar, RAND.
Benjamin Patton, Patton Veterans Project.
Jackson Haney, Office of Senator Jon Tester, Montana

0800HRS EST Committee Chair Joseph Anderson initiated the meeting, took roll call to establish quorum facilitated a brainstorming session to determine the four to five topics the Committee would like to focus on for the next committee report. The table below represents the items for consideration:

Committee Discussion:

0900HRS EST Committee DFO Richard Barbato and Committee Chair Joseph Anderson then reviewed the meeting concept for the remainder of the day, in crafting the 24th Report. Committee Chair Joseph Anderson discussed the Committee working groups for the February 2024 meeting. During this breakout group discussion, preparations were made in advance of the 24th Report crafting and associated recommendations.

Breakout groups will focus on the following:

Group 1 – Partnering and Referral from the Defense Health Agency (DHA). Group 2 – VA DoD Transition Assistance Program (TAP)
Group 3 – Recruiting & Retention of Staff within the Readjustment Counseling Service
Group 4 - How can VA Best partner with Veteran Service Organizations (VSO)

The committee then adjourned for a ten-minute break.

The committee re-convened after the ten-minute break.

1000HRS EST High level / committee wide breakout occurred to discussion preparation of 24th Committee report and associated recommendations, as well as the next committee meeting to be held in February of 2024.

Breakout session discussion then ended, and the Committee came together for final discussion.

The committee finally discussed potential locations for their next meeting, as well as briefing elements and potential dates in which to meet, deciding on Tampa Florida, Vet center in the vicinity and the Tampa VA Medical Center P.R.E.P. Program.

Committee Chair Joseph Anderson adjourned the meeting at 1200HRS EST.

/s/Joseph Anderson
Committee Chair
January 9, 2024