**Colorado Board of Veterans Affairs**

January 6, 2023

VA Regional Office

Lakewood, CO

**Opening**

Ms. Hammon called the meeting to order at 0902. The Pledge of Allegiance was recited and a moment of silence was held for POWs, MIAs, those deployed, their families, and all those killed in the line of duty.

**Members Present**

Pat Hammon, Chair

Sheila Scanlon, Vice-Chair

Lacey Golonka, Secretary

Longinos Gonzalez, Member

Sean Maday, Member

Jasmine Motupalli, Member

Raymond Taylor, Member

**Staff Present**

Michael Bruno, DMVA Deputy Executive Director

David Callahan, CDVA Director

Lisa Stamm, CDVA Grants Administrator

James Poteet, CDVA Appeals and Hearings Specialist

Kristy Cunningham, State Veterans Service Officer-Southwest

Glen Marciniak, State Veterans Service Officer-Northeast

Eric Moncibais, Interim Lead State VSO, State Veterans Service Officer-Southeast

Carissa Snyder, CDVA Program Assistant

Beth Maxwell, CDVA Administrative Assistant

**Guests Present**

Ron Brown, Yuma County Veterans Service Officer

Erin Cavit, Hinsdale County Veterans Service Officer

Katie Claussen, Denver VARO Assistant Director

Catherine Dolan, Denver VARO Veterans Service Center Manager

Cindy Meyer, Teller County Veterans Service Officer

Richard Nagley, Veterans Coalition of the San Luis Valley

Steve Otero, Gunnison County Veterans Service Officer

Andrew Post, Denver VARO Loan Guaranty, Assistant Director

Michael Rohrbach, Denver and Cheyenne VARO Director

Sheldon Smith, Montrose/Ouray Counties Veterans Service Officer

Roxie Smith, Crowley County Veterans Service Officer

Adam Sutton, Boulder County Veterans Service Officer

Eric Winterrowd, Arapahoe County Veterans Service Officer

Jim Ziruolo, Denver VARO Veterans Readiness and Employment Officer

**Agenda**

Ms. Hammon said that Mr. Bruno’s report would be moved up on the agenda and that the state VSOs would report at 10:30.

**Approval of Minutes**

Mr. Taylor corrected typographical errors on pages 1, 3, 4, 5 and a grammatical error on page 4. Ms. Hammon corrected the phrase “sea force” on page 5 to “Navy and Marine Corps” and changed “Air Force Academy” to “academy” under her remarks on the same page. Ms. Scanlon corrected the word choice under Ms. Hammon’s remarks from “donate” to “send” and corrected a grammatical error on page 4. Ms. Golonka corrected a typographical error on page 2. Mr. Maday corrected a grammatical error on page 2 and typographical errors on 3, 4, and 5. Mr. Maday moved that the minutes be approved as corrected. Ms. Scanlon seconded. The motion carried.

**VARO Presentations**

Ms. Hammon welcomed the VA staff and recognized Mr. Rohrbach. Mr. Rohrbach thanked the Board for the invitation and for its support of Colorado veterans, and invited Ms. Claussen to speak. Ms. Claussen thanked the Board for the meeting invitation. She has served as the VARO assistant director since March 2022, having previously served as service center manager.

Mr. Rohrbach addressed VARO operations. The two main lines of effort are disability compensation and Veterans Readiness and Employment. The Denver VARO also houses offices for insurance and Loan Guaranty, although those functions report to the VA Central Office. He said out of 40,0,00 veterans in Colorado approximately 35% are receiving disability compensation. Approximately 80% of those veterans are male 20% are female. Nearly 13,000 of pending claims nationwide are from Colorado veterans, 4,000 of which are PACT Act related. Nationally VA has received more than 230,000 claims as a result of the PACT Act. VA has increased staff due to the passing of the PACT Act by 400,000 within the past year with additional staff increases to come. PACT Act claims are a priority for processing. Ms. Hammon asked if claims for PACT Act issues should be filed separately from non-PACT Act issues. Mr. Rohrbach said that if a PACT issue is on a claim with non-PACT Act issues the claim will still be treated as a PACT Act claim. Mr. Winterrowd asked if claim processing timelines are anticipated to be impacted by the number of PACT Act claims. Mr. Rohrbach said that is not yet known. VA anticipates some backlog but is hoping to mitigate it by continuing to hire staff. A claim is considered backlogged if it is has been processing for 125 days or more. Ms. Dolan said other priorities include age, date of claim, and serious health conditions, and those priorities will not be displaced due to PACT Act claims.

Ms. Scanlon asked what the Board can do to assist the service center. Ms. Dolan said her office has a good relationship with James Poteet and his office, and she asked those in attendance to continue to encourage veterans to file claims through a veterans service organizations. She said it is helpful for VSOs to be clear on what contentions are being claimed and that VA has seen a high quality of claims coming through CDVA. She said it is also helpful to notify veterans that receiving VA benefits does not reduce benefits availability for any other veterans. Mr. Callahan said he has heard veterans express that they are reluctant to file new PACT Act claims because they are concerned that other ratings will be re-examined. Ms. Dolan said that new claims are evaluated in regard to the new contentions. She said if VA detects a clear and unmistakable error, those have to be corrected and that claims for increase can at times result in a decreased rating, but rating reductions are never a goal and must be evidence based. VA will invite claims if they detect prospective service connections that have not been claimed.

Mr. Post said that home loans are down due to current interest rates. COVID forbearances have ended and a lot of focus is on veterans whose mortgages are in arrears. Ms. Hammon thanked Mr. Post and his team for their assistance to veterans in a difficult housing market.

Mr. Ziruolo said positive outcomes are a key measure for VR&E, which is a veteran gaining and maintaining sustainable employment. Partnership with DVOPs has helped veterans find employment in their communities, and the VARO has hired 31 program participants. Staff turnover has been a complicating factor including both recruitment and retention.

**DMVA Report**

Ms. Hammon recognized Mr. Bruno, saying that he had a very exciting announcement. He said has bene promoted to general and will be Chief of Staff of the Air for the Colorado National Guard. He will retain his position as Deputy Executive Director of the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs. Ms. Hammon congratulated him on behalf of the Board. He said that 50 service members were activated to man warming centers during the recent severe cold. The Civil Air Patrol is hiring a full time employee to assist with goal development and strategic planning. He said that he would like to assist the Board with its strategic plan. The kickoff should be at the February meeting and will include a SWOT analysis and discussion of lines of effort. He asked that all Board members review the 2018-2020 strategic plan in advance of the meeting and consider the strategic policy initiatives in that plan.

**Public Comments**

Mr. Nagley asked if the annual report has been released and if a special meeting was held in December. Ms. Hammon said that no special meeting was held because schedules did not coincide. She said that the annual report is complete and will be posted once the Board has confirmed it has been received by the General Assembly.

**State VSO Reports**

Southwest VSO: Ms. Cunningham said December outreach included southwestern collaborative, the quarterly planning meeting of Vets4Vets of Archuleta County, the Cortez Outreach Center, and meetings with county commissioners. Opportunities include training planned in San Juan County, training she has received is how to administer the state’s Learning Management System, the recurring Wednesday coffee times, and planning for spring training. Successes include the recent Ute Outreach Day, an increase in PACT Act claims, a Women’s VSO group formed in Cortez, and retention of Montezuma County VSO Sarah Kuhn, who will remain with the county as Associate VSO. Issues are the lack Veteran Directed Care in the region, no DEERS office, limited shelters, and limited availability of mental health care.

Northwest VSO: Mr. Moncibais reported on behalf of Mr. Edginton. He said December outreach included events at the vet center, outreach to VOA, HUD-VASH, and Caregiver Support, the Colorado Mesa University Student Veteran Alliance, and the local VFW. Opportunities included training in Rio Blanco County and establishing regular site visits with county offices. Successes included retroactive payments and projected 12 months’ increase in compensation of $668,511.43, and the Routt County VSO assisted a veteran in getting a $38K debt waived. Issues include access to VSOs and to mental health care.

Northeast VSO: Mr. Marciniak thanked everyone for the warm welcome to CDVA. He said December outreach included attending the CCI Conference in Westminster and Wreaths Across Colorado in Kit Carson County. Opportunities include face-to-face intro meetings with the service officers in the northeast region and meet with commissioners within the region. Successes include securing office space in Burlington and establishing weekly regional team calls. Issues are the lack of a CVSO in both Washington and Kit Carson Counties and assessing the training level of CVSOs.

Central VSO: Mr. Moncibais reported on behalf of Mr. Stem. He said outreach included continued partnership with VBA, VHA, and Community Care, attendance at the CCI Conference, and connecting with Valley Hope, which offers veteran-specific inpatient substance abuse care. Opportunities include partnership with Valley Hope and the addition of Grand and Summit Counties to the Central Region. A notable success was assisting a veteran who is a single father to acquire an 80% combined rating on an initial disability claim. The most pressing current issue is that the Division is waiting on the finalization of the governor’s budget for future planning.

Southeast VSO: Mr. Moncibais said outreach included a radio interview with Senior Living, joining the Mount Carmel Veteran Voice podcast, an initial team meeting of the San Luis Valley VSOs, and the Air Force Association Christmas party. Opportunities include becoming accredited with American Legion and a mentor for Veterans Court. Successes include covering BVA and pre-determination hearings, training of county VSOs, and supporting the VA’s VEAC event. There were no urgent issues to report.

*The Board recessed at 11:00 a.m. and resumed at 11:10 a.m.*

**Old Business**

Customer Surveys: Mr. Callahan said that the customer service survey is ready to be released and will be shared once it is publicly available. The survey will be sent to more than 8,000 clients and will remain active for six months.

Annual Report: Ms. Hammon said the annual report was completed with Ms. Snyder’s assistance. It has been submitted to the Assembly through the office of the Legislative Liaison. She said the process next year will be started to coincide with the start of the state fiscal year with the goal of eliciting more timely responses from other agencies.

**New Business -** none

**Standing Reports**

DVA: Mr. Callahan said that pending legislative actions are permission for the cemetery to spend gifts, grants, and donations and to have applications for property tax exemptions submitted directly to county assessors. Second interviews have been conducted for Women’s VSO and a selection is anticipated by the end of January. Also pending is an appointment for Veterans Service Officer Supervisor. Several items for the Division are part of the governor’s budget and there is the possibility of adding up to 10 new staff positions, including two for the VMC. Conversations are underway regarding how to obtain additional funding for Honor Guard stipends. If the program continues the Division’s goal is to increase the funding by an additional $20,000. Ms. Scanlon asked if there is additional funding for the current year. Mr. Callahan asked Ms. Stamm for an opinion on using VTF funds. Ms. Stamm said that she is waiting on a response from the state Controller’s office as it is not clear whether this is a permissible expense for the VTF. Ms. Hammon asked that she report on that at the next meeting. Mr. Maday asked if donations could be used for this purpose and Mr. Callahan said he would look into it. Mr. Callahan said the state will continue with VetraSpec as the claim management system for at least one more year. He is seeking spending authority to fund a possible contract with TransUnion. He referred the Board to the written reports for the WROS and the VMC.

NACVSO/CCVSOA: Mr. Bosworth said he obtained feedback from county veterans service officers regarding the prospective claim management system and provided that data to Mr. Callahan. He concurs with the decision to stay with VetraSpec for the time being. He is completing the bylaw changes discussed at the fall conference and will present those to CCVSOA members prior to the spring training. His office also participated in the VA VEAC. This was the last of a series in a pilot program and the hope is that it will become an official program in the future. Ms. Scanlon asked if marketing was targeted to women veterans and Mr. Bosworth said he would confirm. He said the VSO awards from 2022 were done incorrectly and are currently being replaced. The VA Secretary visited Colorado Springs and both Mr. Bosworth and Mr. Callahan attended. It was an opportunity to discuss long waits for VSO services that could be alleviated with funding for additional staff.

Grants: Ms. Stamm said additional staff is needed to keep grant payment timely. Application webinars are underway and have had good attendances. She was able to conduct five technical assistance session with new applicants for both grants. The office supply item for VTF and program costs for VAG have been well received. She is proactively contacting grantees both for prospective budget modifications and to make sure they are on track to execute their grant funds. In an update to the written report, VT23-23 has submitted for reimbursement and another who had not yet spent funds has been in contact. Final budget modification will be reported in February. The Department of Regulatory Agencies has begun a sunset review of the Veterans Assistance Grant and Board members may be contacted.

**Board Member Remarks**

Ms. Scanlon said that she attended Wreaths Across American at Fort Logan with the Women Marines Association. The holiday party at Buckley was successful with more than 100 attendees. She attended a VAG application webinar last month and plans to attend a VTF webinar in January. The Women Marines Association has expended their Veterans Assistance Grant.

Ms. Golonka said a lot of time off in December as she prepares for her new professional role. She will complete Sergeants Major Academy this month.

Mr. Maday said he appreciated the opportunity to attend Wreaths Across America at the VMC and congratulated Ms. Ingalls, Mr. Stogsdill, and the VMC staff on the event.

Mr. Gonzalez said attended several military holiday events in December, including Northcom on 03 December, the Chamber on 08 December, and the academy superintendent’s event on 10 December.

Mr. Taylor said the local Wreath Across American event saw 75 volunteers laying wreaths at more than 360 graves. A flyover distinguished the event. The Wednesday coffee times have been beneficial with good information. Major issues in the area include transportation, housing, and economic hardships.

Ms. Hammon said she attended Wreaths Across American at the VMC in Grand Junction. Locally several organizations partnered to lay 380 wreaths in four cemeteries in Eagle County. She is participating in the VHA’s ASCEND survey to help determine how to assist unenrolled veterans with suicide prevention. The survey has had a 79% response rate. Sunaina Kumar is the new director for VISN 19. The local government is working to reinstall three veteran commemorative plaques that were removed from an old county building. Eagle County will celebrate its 140th anniversary in June.

**State Veterans Issues**

Ms. Hammon said issues captured at the meeting include access to a DEERS office, shelter, mental health access in rural area, access to CBOCS and health care, transportation, housing, and a need for claims to be processed through VSOs.

**Upcoming Meetings**

The next stated meeting is scheduled for February 3, possibly at Joint Forces Headquarters to accommodate Mr. Bruno. CDVA staff will work on establishing a longer term location schedule.

February 3, JFHQ, Centennial – tentative

March 3

April 7

May 5

June 2

**Adjournment**

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 12:43 p.m.