

Board Minutes
04December2015
Colorado State University Lory Student Center
1101 Central Ave Mail, Fort Collins, CO 80521

Dana Niemela, Chair, called the meeting to order at 0906 hours. The Pledge of Allegiance was recited and a moment of silence was observed for our POW, MIA, troops in battle or in harm's way, and all service members.

Roll Call of Members and Introduction of Staff and Guests

Board Members Present:

Dana Niemela, Chair
Duane Dailey, Vice-Chair
Rene Simard, Secretary
Hollie Caldwell, Member
William "Robby" Robinson, Member
Jack Rudder, Member

Board Members Absent:

Christopher Holden, Member

DMVA Staff Present:

Mickey Hunt, DMVA Deputy Director
Ben Mestas, CDVA Director
Gail Hoagland, DMVA Grant Administrator
Carissa Snyder, CDVA Administrative Assistant

Guests Present:

Josh Hayes, President, CSU Student Veterans Organization
Sharon Lindell, CDLE Veterans Employment Representative, CSU Adult Learner and Veterans Services
Jennifer Pickett, Director, CSU Adult Learner and Veterans Services
Theresa Rudder, Jack's wife

Approval of Minutes from November

Mr. Robinson corrected a misspelling of the last name of board member Christopher Holden. Ms. Niemela corrected Richard Sandrock's title to Manager of Community Partnerships, Office of the Governor. Mr. Dailey clarified that his comment to Arapahoe County Commissioner Bill Holen recorded in the fifth paragraph of page 2 was directed to the Arapahoe County Board of County Commissioners. The minutes were then approved as corrected.

Board Member Comments

Mr. Dailey commented on the attendance and success of the Veterans Day event held at Wings over the Rockies, which honored World War II veterans and had 102 of them present. He reported that Grand County's Veterans Day event the next week had 380 in attendance.

Mr. Simard reported the death of George “Joe” Sakato on 02 December 2015 at the age of 94. Mr. Sakato was a member of the U.S. Army’s 442nd Regimental Combat Team in World War II and a Medal of Honor recipient.

Ms. Caldwell added to Mr. Dailey’s comments regarding the veteran Day event at Wings over the Rockies, remarking on the unusually high number World War II veterans at the event.

Ms. Niemela reported that on 09 November she and Mr. Simard participated in a Veterans Community Panel hosted by the Sturm Family Foundation and the University of Denver’s Graduate School of Professional Psychology. The University is considering the implementation of a cross-disciplinary Military Psychology program. The panel was open to the public and was attended by the University chancellor, dean of students, members of the Student Veterans Organization, and various clinicians. Mr. Simard added that this endeavor is part of a greater effort by DU to become more aware and responsive to the needs of veteran students and their families.

Ms. Niemela proceeded to report on the Denver Stand Down held on 19 November. Participant feedback indicates that the veterans served are interested in more intensive, ongoing services. Homelessness is a continuing problem and can be difficult to accurately measure and track. The number of homeless veterans in Denver seems to have decreased, which indicates that street outreach and transitional programs are helping. Permanent housing is harder to achieve, and Ms. Niemela stated that both the VA and local community providers are considering sustainability plans through case management.

Mr. Rudder spoke in reference to the veterans he represents in the southern Colorado and San Luis Valley. He stated that veterans are having logistical difficulties with C&P exams, particularly those scheduled through Veterans Evaluations Service, or “VES.” Mr. Rudder personally called the VES contracting agency in Houston but made little progress. Mr. Dailey concurred with Mr. Rudder’s concern, and added that use of the CHOICE card has created additional problems for veterans seeking health care. He said veterans in his county no longer use it.

Visitor Comments

Ms. Lindell runs the Northern Colorado Stand Downs and reported that the Fort Collins Stand Down was held on 10 November. The event is in its ninth year and this year’s event was the best attended to date. Homeward 2020 helped to spread the word.

Mr. Hayes explained the mission of the CSU Student Veterans Organization is to aid veterans in their transition to education and to employment. While this is a nationwide organization, the CSU chapter was the first in Colorado. This chapter works closely with school administration and the VA to help meet the needs of student veterans. Their most recent meeting was attended by 23 student veterans, three members of the school administration, and focused mainly on issues faced by CSU student veterans, including problems with the Vocation Rehabilitation tutoring program and difficulties with handicap parking. In regard to the latter, Ms. Pickett stated that all lot parking at CSU is paid and is \$442.00 for a year. Students can elect to park on the street for free and walk to the classroom buildings, but for some disabled veterans this is not possible. After some conversation it was decided that while this is negotiated with the school, disabled veterans in need of assistance could probably be helped through the school’s Veterans Assistance Grant.

Ms. Niemela inquired about the number of student veterans enrolled at CSU. Mr. Hayes replied that there are currently 1500 students using GI Bill benefits, with 900 of those students living on campus. Mr. Hayes said the veterans representatives at CSU who help students with the GI Bill are knowledgeable and effective. Ms. Lindell added that the school has received an Anschutz donation for programmatic

changes to become more veteran-friendly. Mr. Hayes said the school's welcoming atmosphere for veterans was one of his deciding factors in his enrollment.

Ms. Lindell then described her role as the Veterans Employment Representative partnering with CSU's Adult Learner and Veterans Services. The Department facilitates veteran employment by both helping student veterans and graduates find sustainable employment and keeping services available to ensure they are able to stay employed, with the end goal being a meaningful career. Services are offered on an as needed basis, and Ms. Lindell has the flexibility to try to assist any student, including those enrolled in the global campus. Ms. Pickett stated that one difficulty has been finding housing for new graduates who are still seeking or have just started employment, and GI Bill benefits stop paying once the veteran graduates. Ms. Lindell stated that VAG funds provide some help managing this gap.

Ms. Niemela inquired about the availability of mental and behavioral health counseling for student veterans. Mr. Hayes confirmed that is available on campus but accessibility can be a problem due to long waiting lists. Ms. Lindell added that her office can assist by connecting student veterans to other resources available in the community. Mr. Dailey remarked that a hurdle for veterans who leave the service with training is to acquire certification in fields in which they have experience. Ms. Lindell said that student veterans who need six months or less of education to acquire certification can receive it for free through the workforce center. Mr. Simard pointed out that this is helpful but not available in all fields. Ms. Caldwell agreed, also saying that not all schools can read military transcripts.

Board Member Reports

Ms. Niemela thanked the Board members and DMVA staff for providing written reports and invited them to share summaries with the board.

Mr. Hunt said that in reference to earlier discussion, he agrees that there is not much transition assistance offered by the VA to graduating student veterans and said that support has been up to schools to provide. He said that the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs and Regis University also both have good veterans support programs. He participated in MyVA Community panel in Colorado Springs on 03 December that included both Bill Holen, Arapahoe County Commissioner and Danny Pummill, VA Acting Undersecretary. The panel differed in character from what was expected; rather than a community meeting it was a VA informational meeting. Ms. Niemela said that some communities already collaborate well and don't need a VA-centered model, with which Mr. Mestas agreed. In regard to concerns about VES, Mr. Hunt said in his experience difficulties with scheduling can be resolved by supervisors, which may be a short-term option for veterans coping with this problem. The current VES contract is under review.

Mr. Mestas reported that a report on all Colorado Stand Downs is available with the exception of Alamosa. This data has been tracked since 2008 and is a good opportunity to compare figures over time. Mr. Dailey inquired about the date of the Denver Stand Down. Mr. Mestas confirmed that the date did change from 07 November to 19 November due to a delay in an item shipment. Mr. Rudder offered to try to follow up on results from the Stand Down in Alamosa.

Mr. Rudder commented that the SVCLC at Homelake can't fill all its cottages, and is often prevented from accepting otherwise eligible persons since 75% of residents have to be veterans. Mr. Hunt said he has met with HHS deputy director Sara Orrick and suggested inviting her to a future meeting.

Ms. Niemela stated that there was nothing Greg Dorman wanted to add to his submitted report.

Ms. Hoagland reported that four of eight regional webinars have been held with current grantees and were well attended and generally successful. The webinars are designed to answer questions and to reinforce the necessity of compliance with grant contract terms. It was emphasized that past compliance will impact the consideration of applications in the next cycle. Issues of lingering confusion among grantees seemed to be what is meant by “unduplicated” veterans, why supporting documentation is specific and extensive, and why the new applications are longer. Mr. Dailey attended webinar training and said that recurrent grantees resist change. He stated that the current system offers fair and consistent treatment for all.

Let the record show that here the Board recessed at 10:48 a.m., and resumed to labor at 10:55 a.m.

Annual Report

Ms. Niemela stated that a draft of the annual report is ready and draft cover letter will be available by the week of 07 December. An item noted in last year’s report was that the waiting time on veteran’s claims placed larger burdens on local resources. Mr. Mestas asked if that included the timeline for claims on appeal. It did not. Mr. Mestas stated that the current timeframe for an appeal is two to four years. Ms. Niemela suggested that a recent push to process claims may have resulted in more denials, thus more appeals. Mr. Mestas told the Board that Denver has been selected as a site for pilot appeals project in which a veteran will get a preliminary hearing within 45 days of an appeal. A meeting on this topic will be held on 08 December. Ms. Niemela said that this year’s report will feature access to care, particularly mental health care, VES, and the additional funding the state now provides to county veterans services. She asked the Board for suggestions of items to highlight in the cover letter. Mr. Dailey said that the Golden clinic has very proactive in screening and referral, and Ms. Niemela said she will include information about the SVCLCs, increasing census in rural areas, and access to housing. Mr. Simard suggested including information on community partnerships. Both Mr. Robinson and Mr. Mestas suggested including data on VA claims and appeals processing times.

Strategic Planning

Ms. Niemela told the Board that the Department strategic planner will not be on board until June 2016, so the board will proceed without for the time being. She said the intent of the meeting was not to make a strategic plan, but to discuss the intent and purpose of the Board, beginning with why sitting Board members agreed to serve and what they hope to accomplish in that service.

Ms. Niemela said that she joined hoping to effect policy change, and that interaction has increased between the VA and local communities. Mr. Rudder said he hoped to provide a voice for rural veterans. He said VA policies are not always a good fit for veterans who don’t live in urban areas.

Mr. Dailey agrees with Mr. Rudder, observing that while the State office does a good job of outreach into local communities, the Federal VA does not, and the concern is that the interests of rural veterans are not considered when policies are made or changed. He said he would like to see more cooperation with the Federal VA. Mr. Simard said that he too wanted to effect change. He too expressed similar frustration with Federal VA communication.

Ms. Caldwell said this meeting was her fifth as a Board member. She said that the Board needs areas of courses where it can make tangible progress. Mr. Robinson observed a lack of interface between the States and the VA. Mr. Mestas suggested that Board members be active advocates in their congressional districts to develop the Board’s stated purpose “to advise and consult” the Governor on matters pertaining to Colorado veterans.

Mr. Robinson pointed out that some of the founding missions of the Board have been accomplished, such as establishing the State cemetery and reforming the SVCLCs. He said the Board needs to find a new focus. Ms. Niemela suggested making use of a traveling Board to bring community members to the table. Mr. Dailey said that extensive travel might be difficult for Board members who also work full time jobs.

Ms. Niemela suggested combining Board meetings with community roundtables to keep the events down to a one-day commitment which will make the stated meetings longer. In reference to the meeting format, she asked the Board if the current agenda structure was adequate or if anyone would like to recommend changes. There was a consensus to dispose of the time limit for public contact, since it is rarely needed or enforced.

The Board agreed to continue with guest presentations from the area in which each Board meeting is held. Ms. Hoagland recommended inviting multiple representatives from the community. Ms. Caldwell suggested that Board members consider visiting veterans organizations while in the area. Ms. Niemela said that Board members should coordinate site visits so that local organizations aren't overwhelmed.

Mr. Simard recommended adding action items to the minutes and agenda and there was discussion regarding appointing a subcommittee to liaise with Colorado Serves, or to invite representatives from that body to serve on Board subcommittees. Ms. Hoagland said either would require a bylaw change, but Colorado Serves representatives could assist the Board as expert consultants. Mr. Robinson reminded the Board that approval would be needed from the Adjutant General regarding new action items or partnerships; the Board will not be able to back any efforts that are not supported by the Governor.

The Board then discussed the locations of upcoming meetings. Ms. Hoagland said that the March and April meetings at least need to be held in the Denver area, since high-volume work will be required on the Veterans Trust Fund Grant. The meeting location schedule was set as follows:

January - Pueblo
February – Sterling
March – Denver area
April – Denver area
May –West Jefferson or Park County/Bailey/Conifer/Evergreen
June – San Luis Valley/Homelake

Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on 08 January in Pueblo at 08:00 a.m.

Adjournment

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 11:09 a.m.