



#### January 28, 2016 Meeting Minutes

Present: Terry Allebaugh, James Alston, Wesley Alston, J'Metria Anderson, Nancy Anderson, Dale Badgett, Fred Baker, Catherine Barker, Archie Barrow, Dr. Beth Barton, Glenn Batten, Matt Berthinet, Mathias Bishop, Mike Bishop, Andrew Blizzard, Ronald Bogle, Worth Bolton, Chris Brandenburg, Gregory Branch, Dasha Bravo, Dr. Bob Bray, Kate Brett, Jeremy Brogden, Brenda Brubaker, Jeffrey Carney, Terry Celeste, Doug Chapman, Jennifer Chauncey, Maier Collier, Will Collins, Jessica Conard, Karen Creech, Hank Debnam, Paul Dillon, Jeff Doyle, Lane Dyer, Khan Eakin, Mark Edmonds, Dr. Lowell Faison, Dr. Wei Li Fang, Pat Fitzgerald, Reginna Ford, Emily Godfrey, Bob Goodale, James Gorham, Diana Graham, Jeri Graham, Will Wayne Grant, Valencia Green, Jonathan Guider, Daniel Hackley, Gilbert Hageman, Brian Hahne, Kathryn Hare, Judy Harmon, Aaron Harper, Barbara Hedman, SGT Erin Hastings, Troy Hershberger, Phil Hewett, James Hicks, Dan Hoffmann, Charlene Irvin, Andy Jackson, Teresa Johnson, Robert Jones, Terri Kane, Laura Kapoun, Angela Harper King, Victoria Knott, John Letteney, Denny Lewis, Carolyn Lightfoot, Leslie Lingo, Joseph Micah, Jerome Malloy, Ron Mangum, Michelle Marcano, Michael Marhelko, Ralph Markwood, Tony Marshall, Bryan Martin, James McCleskey, Marshall McCloud, Enrique McClymont, Maureen Merkl, Garry Merritt, Dr. George Millsaps, Brenda Monforti, Richard Moxley, Harold Murphy, Sylvia Murphy, Blair Myhand, Patrick Natole, Lynn Newsom, Terry Nichols, John O'Connor, Scott Panagrosso, Ilario Pantano, Mr. Parker, Tim Peedin, Harry Pennington, Ray Perry, Melanie Piedra, Robert Pigg, Kimberly Poff, Brian Propst, James Prosser, Robert Ramos, Cheryl Rawls, Ron Rau, Jean Reaves, Dale Robbins, Dave Roddenberry, Jason Roncoroni, Ronnie Sadoski, Ron Sandroock, Kristy Schwartz, Austin Shearer, Rob Sherwood, Anne Showalter, Chris Simpson, Leigh Ann Skeens, Edward Smith, Jeff Smith, Tony Sowards, Belivia Spaulding, Flo Stein, Annette Stevenson, Dr. Samuel Strickland, Dr. Cindy Swinkels, Robert Tabares, Doug Taggart, Mark Teachey, Kasey Timberlake, Don Timmons, Harold Trapier, Tywonna Trapier, Eric Truesdale, Lucas Vrbsky, Pat Walker, Darlene Webb, Kristina Wilhelmson, Stephen Wilkins, Shanika Williams-Johnson, Travis Williams, Brandon Wilson, Secretary Cornell Wilson, Sara Wilson, Laressa Witt, Bobby Womack, and Beth Yoho

Secretary Wilson welcomed everyone to the first meeting of 2016. After introductions of all participants, Ilario Pantano introduced Officer Harry Pennington of the Apex police force. He told how Apex officers with a military background helped de-escalate a situation involving a Veteran. It led to identification of other Veterans on the force, with training offered to 22 officers in September. Since that time, the force has experienced four saves. Officers received a standing ovation.

Ms. Rawls, Director of the Winston-Salem regional office of the VBA and a Vice Chair of the Governor's Working Group, is currently on detail to Philadelphia. She opened the Dialogue with the VA and introduced the VBA presenters and Mr. Wilkins, the public affairs officer, for VISN 6. Mr. Wilkins introduced Mr. Hoffmann, the Director of VISN 6.

Mr. Hoffmann noted that VISN 6 consists of 4 medical centers in NC and 3 medical centers in VA. Beckley VAMC was once part of VISN 6 but is now in VISN 5. WV had 4 medical centers and each to a different Network Director so all of them will now be part of VISN 5. He noted that VISN 6 has been the fastest growing VISN in all of VHA in the past 10 years and is expected to be the fastest growing VISN in the next 10 years as well. The growth is attributed to the growing number of retired Veterans choosing to live in the VISN and also from the current war. The percentage of women Veterans is also growing; VISN 6 is in the top 3 of all VISNs for female veterans. The VISN has been working hard to decrease the number of days that Veterans have to wait to obtain an appointment.

### Average Days Wait for an Appointment

	August 15, 2014	November 30, 2015
<b>Primary Care</b>		
• Asheville	6.87	6.80
• Durham	12.48	8.89
• Fayetteville	31.06	18.52
• Salisbury	4.06	8.49
<b>Specialty Care</b>		
• Asheville	5.71	7.76
• Durham	8.64	10.67
• Fayetteville	13.02	17.92
• Salisbury	7.62	13.14
<b>Mental Health Care</b>		
• Asheville	3.73	4.44
• Durham	3.93	3.78
• Fayetteville	4.55	8.36
• Salisbury	10.76	12.15

Other topics that Mr. Hoffmann addressed were suicide prevention, interagency partnerships, housing, workforce, and infrastructure. Suicide prevention is a serious and complex issue, with over 800 employees working on it. Both VA employees and Veterans need to be aware of suicide issues and contact numbers. The VA is working with justice department to collaborate on diversion and support for Veterans. In terms of housing, the VA is trying to address demand and working with community stakeholders. There is a low supply of many specialties but a high demand so there is a nationwide shortage. It is anticipated that in the future, there will also be a demand for primary care doctors. The VA is competing with the private sector, and salaries have recently been adjusted by the VA Secretary. The VA is on top in terms of telemedicine, secure messaging, and working with Veterans to find out results and order prescriptions through the Internet. VA medical facilities need to replace every square foot every 25 years; the average age of Medical Center is 75 years. Architecture needs to follow technology. The VA has found that 87% of contacts are outpatient visits, which explains the new space coming online. The VISN has added 33 sites of care in the last 10 years in order to get care closer to where our Veterans live. The Fayetteville HCC and Jacksonville CBOC are now open; the Charlotte and Kernersville HCCs are due in 2016; and the Sanford CBOC is due in 2016. The VISN has been approved for Raleigh 3, and the proposed Raleigh HCC looks like it will be approved. HCCs are health care centers that are outpatient clinics with extended hours. More Veterans are beginning to use CHOICE.

Ms. Skeens is the acting director of the regional benefits office, with 740 staff. It is the third largest Veterans Service Center (VSC) and the sixth largest Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E). Their number one priority is claims processing, including appeals and non-rating. They focus on quality in all areas of claims processing. Other benefits are processed elsewhere. For example, education is handled by the Atlanta RPO. There are over 35,000 student Veterans in 278 institutions in North Carolina. Pension and survivor benefits are processed out of the Philadelphia office. They have limited outreach and travel funds so they are looking for creative ways to increase claims processing. Their goal is to reach at least one veteran in each county. Last year they conducted 4 claims clinics in partnership with Goodwill Industries, saw over 2,000 Veterans, and paid over \$895,000 paid in retroactive awards.

Mr. Chapman is responsible for all disability compensation in the State. One hundred fifty staff is dedicated to all separating service members. They have seen a 93% improvement in processing VSC rating and pre-discharge rating claims. Currently, the rating inventory is 22,717, with 87 average days pending. The inventory of homeless claims is at 97 with average days pending of 76. There is a total of 9302 appeals pending, with 18 disagreement officers on staff. They have also hired 59 temporary workers to help with old claims.

Mr. Pantano said that even though one of the VA's biggest problem is space, they still gave space for Veterans Services Officers to have offices at their facilities.

Ms. Lightfoot discussed VR&E benefits under Chapter 31, which is the pathway for increased earning capacity where the end goal is employment. There are 5 tracks of service, with 4 being employment and the 5<sup>th</sup> for service-connected disabilities where employment is not realistic due to the severity of the disabilities. When employment is not feasible, VR&E tries to get them to be more independent. Veterans have up to 12 years of eligibility and 48 months of services that they can receive. Benefits include training programs, payment of tuition and supplies, and a monthly stipend. Employers receive tax incentives through the Chapter 31 program. Forty-nine full-time employees provided services to 5500 participants in the past year, which represents an enormous growth in the program. A total of 278 found suitable employment after participating in the program. Of the 278, 193 were unemployed (70.4%) when applying for VR&E services. The average monthly salary of those who were employed at application rose from \$746 to \$3031 after receiving VR&E services. New initiatives include telecounseling; case management through secure chat sessions; electronic medical referrals; and electronic submission of applications for benefits. VSOs can also help Veterans apply.

Ms. Merkl presented on MyVA and the Veterans Experience, one of 12 initiatives of MyVA. The VA has restructured itself into five regions and would like to increase the visibility of MyVA in the North Atlantic district, which includes 15 states from ME to NC and west to WV. The headquarter is in NYC while the interim director Joy White is in DC. They plan to have satellite offices, and an executive assistant with data assistance will be located in Raleigh. Currently, about 47% have trust in the VA—they want it to increase to 70% by the end of the year. Collaboration is key to the initiative so they are meeting stakeholders and conducting outreach to create relationships of trust and to develop community engagement boards. Currently, there are 36 communities, with an additional 16 almost developed, and a goal of 100 by the end of the year. Each community is unique. The VA's role is to share best practices and to offer support.

The audience was provided with the opportunity to ask questions:

- Q. Given that there is a shortage of specialists at the VA, does it ever have reserve MDs come for training?
- A. There is an ongoing hiring process. Fayetteville VAMC is aligned with Duke University, Fort Bragg Womack, and Camp Lejeune. Mr. Wilkins said that he is uncertain whether they utilize military providers, but it sounds like a viable suggestion.
- Q. Ms. Newsom voiced her concern as to whether incarcerated Veterans receive the mental health care that they need.
- Q. Ms. Lingo is a member of Student Veterans of America (SVA). She noted that many student Veterans feel like they are getting left behind. While a social worker has access to internships, what about other majors in the social sciences?

A. Many agencies and organizations don't realize what great talent student Veterans have and what they can offer. The VA pays for work study experiences. Mr. Pantano urged student Veterans to contact his office about work experiences.

Q. What does the VA do to reach out to Veterans?

A. Ms. Merkl said that her father-in-law is a Veteran and had a bad experience with VA so he was reluctant to return. It is a challenge to conduct outreach to a generation that doesn't trust the VA. The best strategy is to collaborate with veteran service organizations since Veterans communicate among themselves. It will take time for the word to get out that the VA has changed. Mr. Wilkins also mentioned that the VA has rural health teams that implement grassroots activities. In addition, federal agencies are trying to integrate with state and county agencies so there is no wrong door.

Mr. Pantano stated the Department's appreciation for Daniel Hackley, who started at the Department as a VA work study student. He is now plays a key role in public information, the preparation of the annual report, and the website. As a student Veteran at NC State University, he was an active member of the SVA. He continued working at the Department after graduation but was recently recruited to work at NC State University. Mr. Hackley will start working as a certifying official on February 8.

Secretary Wilson encouraged the audience to call the VA directly if they have questions. He thanked the speakers and all for attending.

The next meeting will be on Thursday, February 25, 2016, from 2:00 to 4:00 pm in the NC National Guard Auditorium. Please remember to register online by February 22.