

Department of Veterans Affairs
Advisory Committee on Women Veterans
March 16-19, 1999
Minutes

The meeting of the VA Advisory Committee on Women Veterans convened at 8:00 a.m., on March 16, 1999, at VA Headquarters in Washington, DC.

Advisory Members Present

Dr. Linda Schwartz, Chair
Dr. Lois Johns, Vice Chair
COL Karen Ray, USA (ret)
Mrs. Bertha Cruz Hall
Ms. Joy Ilem
Mrs. Veronica A'zera
Mrs. Constance Evans
Ms. Sherry Blede
Mrs. Jan McSparren
CAPT. Lory Manning, USN (Ret)
COL Christine Cook
CSM Douglas Russell, USA (Ret)
CAPT Barbara Brehm (DACOWITS)

VA Staff Present

Ms. Joan Furey, Director 00W
Mrs. Kathy Zeiler, Director, WVHP, VHA
Dr. Susan Mather, ACMD, VHA
Ms. Maryanne Carson, EA, 00W
Mrs. Lynn Howell, NCS
Ms. Lynda Petty, WVC, VBA
Mr. Edward Chow, 008
Mrs. Barbara Brandau, EA, WVHP, VHA

I. Opening Activities

Dr. Schwartz called the Advisory meeting to order at 8:30 AM. Round-table introductions were made.

General Announcements

Prior to reviewing the agenda, Dr. Schwartz informed the Committee that Women in Military Service for America (WIMSA), was holding a special program on 3/16 at noon, and the Committee was invited to attend. If there was interest, the agenda would need to be revised. The Committee unanimously agreed to attend the WIMSA program and the agenda was changed accordingly.

Agenda Change

Dr. Judy Salerno, Chief Consultant for Geriatrics and Extended Care was scheduled to speak on 3/16 from 3:00 PM to 3:45 PM on VA's Long-term Care Program. Unfortunately, Dr. Salerno was called out-of-town and was unable to present. Arrangements were made for someone from that office to speak, and the Committee was notified as soon as those arrangements were made.

Review of Minutes

The minutes of the June 1998 meeting were reviewed and accepted as recorded.

The minutes of the September 1998 meeting were reviewed and accepted as recorded.

Review of Distributed Materials

Ms. Furey reviewed the handouts in the folders for the meeting. They included:

1. The January 1999 GAO report "VA Health Care for Women: Progress Made in Providing Services to Women Veterans"
2. The Department's Response to the Committee's 1998 Report and Recommendations
3. The Executive Summary of the Report of the Senate Commission on Service members and Veterans Transition Assistance

II. Briefings and Presentations

Ms. Joan Furey, Director, Center for Women Veterans

Ms. Furey informed the Committee that the Center has had two major initiatives funded for Fiscal Year 2000:

1. VA will receive 50 million dollars for homeless programs in FY 2000. Mr. Peter Dougherty, Director of the VA Homeless Program, has announced that 2.5 million dollars will be dedicated to funding initiatives specifically designed to address the needs of women veterans who are homeless. Ms. Gay Koerber, Associate Director of the homeless programs for the Veterans Health Administration and Ms. Joan Furey will co-chair a committee to develop a Request for Proposal (RFP) for distribution to VHA field facilities. This committee will be responsible for selecting projects for funding. It is anticipated that the focus of the RFP will be on the development of collaborative programs between VHA facilities and community agencies that have expertise in providing an array of services for women veterans who are homeless.

2. The Center for Women Veterans has received funding to host *Summit 2000*, which will be the second national summit on women veterans issues during FY 2000. Initially, it was anticipated that the Summit would be held in the late Fall or early Spring of 2000, however, we were unable to secure a hotel in Washington D.C. during that time frame to meet our needs. Currently, we are exploring the possibility of holding the Summit sometime in June of 2000. A task force will be organized to develop the Summit agenda. Tentative plans have been discussed to have breakout sessions focusing on the following issues:

- Health Care
- Homelessness
- Employment
- Women in War
- Violence Against Military Women
- Legislation

A matrix, listing all of the recommendations made at the first Summit in 1996, is being developed to show what, if any, action was taken in response to the recommendations. This matrix should help participants develop an appreciation for the work that was done in 1996, and lay a foundation for their discussions at the 2000 Summit.

The final report on the Congressional Commission on Service Members and Veterans Transition Assistance is available on the Internet. They have made numerous recommendations that would improve employment and education opportunities for transitioning service members, many of which were identified as issues of concern in the 1996 Summit. Their report and recommendations have been distributed to the Congress and appropriate Federal agencies (VA, DOL, DOD) for review and comment.

The initial planning for the Year 2000 National Survey of Veterans is underway. Ms. Furey has met with the contractors to discuss the need for a supplemental report on women veterans. The Center has requested that women veterans be over-sampled in the survey to ensure that the sample size is large enough so that the findings will be considered conclusive. It was also requested that minority women veterans should be over-sampled to compensate for their small numbers. Ms. Furey will act as a consultant on women veterans to the contractors who are doing the survey.

Recommendations by Committee: None

Dr. Linda Schwartz, Chair, VA Advisory Committee on Women Veterans

Dr. Schwartz discussed the meeting she had with Mr. West, the Secretary, to present the Committee's 1998 report. She informed the Committee that it was apparent that the Secretary had read the report, and indicated that he was very impressed with it. Other issues discussed with the Secretary included:

- improving the "bridge" between VA and DOD
- the Committee's increased focus on identifying the needs of minority women veterans
- the Committee's interest in having members serve longer than the current 3-year term
- the need for VA to have more women veterans in senior management positions across the Department

Recommendations by Committee: None

Mr. Vincent Barile, National Cemetery System

Mr. Barile reviewed the issues currently being addressed by NCS, including the increasing demand for burial spaces; status of new cemeteries in VA; VA grant program for the development of State Veterans' Cemeteries; planned increase in operating funds for FY 2000; and the status of DOD's report on Military Honors. He also discussed the recent legislation that changed the name of the National Cemetery Administration to the National Cemetery System, and title of Director to Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs.

Recommendations by Committee: None

Mr. Charles Flora, Readjustment Counseling Service

Mr. Flora reviewed the current eligibility criteria for vet center services and discussed the sexual trauma counseling program developed in response to P.L. 102-585. He then showed a videotape entitled "The Vet Center Story", that gave a review of the factors contributing to the development of Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. The tape also showed a comprehensive overview of vet center treatment programs and services designed to assist veteran clients suffering from this disorder. Discussion centered on the 1996 legislation, which will result in Vietnam-era veterans losing their eligibility for service, if they do not access vet center services by 1/1/00. (Veterans who served in-country will remain eligible). Discussion also centered on the establishment of vet centers on Native American reservations.

Recommendations by Committee: Increase outreach efforts designed to inform Vietnam-era veterans that if they do not access vet center services by 1/1/00 they will lose their eligibility for these services.

Ms. Marsha Hoegle: VISN Support Service Center

Ms. Hoegle, Veterans Health Administration (VHA), provided a review of the status of the development of community-based outpatient clinics (CBOC), within the VHA. To date, there are 170 CBOC that are currently operational, and an additional 100 are expected to be functional by the end of FY 2000. There is about a 50-50 split between VA-based clinics and contract clinics. She also discussed the process by which the CBOC are developed, and how their performance is evaluated. Questions focused on the education/orientation of non-VA health care providers on veteran issues; eligibility criteria for access to services; and the provision of mental health services at the CBOCs.

Recommendations by Committee: None

Long-term Care

A copy of *“VA Long-term Care at the Crossroads”*, which is a report of the Federal Advisory Committee on the Future of VA long-term care, was distributed, and the recommendations were reviewed. Overall, the Committee concluded that long-term care must be continued as a major component of VA care, and that it should have equal footing with other components of VA health care. Additional discussion centered on eligibility criteria for admission to VA NHCU; the development of performance measures for VA LTC; VA contract nursing home program; assisted living and residential care programs; and State veterans’ homes.

Recommendations by Committee: None

Mr. Peter Dougherty, Director, VA Homeless Programs

Mr. Dougherty gave an overview of the VA homeless programs. The review included the grant per diem program, residential care program, multi-family transitional care program, Domiciliary care program, and VA stand downs. VA received an increase in funding for homeless programs in FY 99, and expects an additional increase in FY 2000. Goals for FY 2000 include: funding an initiative to improve services for women veterans who are homeless; increasing the number of stand downs and assuring that one is held in each State; and improving services for incarcerated veterans. Currently, we estimate that women comprise about 4% of the homeless veteran population. The number of women veterans served by VA homeless programs has increased from 1.2% in 1992, to 2.7% in 1997, and the number of women veterans in the grant per diem program is approximately 6%. Homeless veterans (men and women) with dependent children continue to pose difficulties for VA, as we are prohibited from spending appropriated funds on non-veterans. However, a number of community organizations have begun to address this issue by developing “reunification” programs, aimed at bringing/keeping families together. VA will be developing legislative proposals that would allow us to provide support to homeless veterans with dependent children.

Recommendations by Committee: None

Ms. Lynda Petty, National Women Veterans Coordinator, Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA)

Ms. Petty focused her presentation on 3 issues: 1) training VBA rating specialists; 2) planning for replicating the Compensation & Pension (C&P) Processing Center for Great Lakes Naval Station at North Chicago VAMC; and 3) planning for addressing the claims backlog.

C&P Processing Centers: Currently, VBA has established 17 processing centers on military installations across the country. The goal is to have 20 centers functional by the end of the FY. Additional plans are being made to establish centers at military bases abroad, including Germany, Korea, Japan and Okinawa. VBA data indicates that 40% of separating service members file VA disability claims. As a result, VBA is trying to establish some kind of VA presence within 50 miles of any military installation.

VBA training initiatives have been ongoing. We are currently working with VHA in developing a joint training for the women veteran coordinators. Training for VBA staff on women's issues has been provided primarily through our Satellite TV broadcast programs. This year, we have two broadcast programs on women's issues: one on PTSD as a result of sexual trauma, which was held in December of 1999; and one on women's health issues which, is scheduled for broadcast in May 2000. Tapes of broadcasts are available at all VA Regional Offices. Attendance at the Satellite broadcasts are not mandatory.

Training programs on women's issues are developed by the Compensation & Pension Advisory Committee on Women's Issues. This Committee is comprised of Lynda Petty and other female employees from VBA field offices. These members have diverse backgrounds, which include rating specialists, adjudicators, women veteran coordinators and service center managers. Ms. Joan Furey and Mrs. Alice Raatjes are consultants to the group. In addition to developing training programs, the Committee identifies other issues relating to women veterans' claims, and makes recommendations to address problems. To date, they have addressed issues related to PTSD claims processing, infertility claims, and gender-sensitive correspondence. Additional training takes place locally.

Claims processing backlog was discussed by Ms. Terry Witty from the Office of Field Operations. The current claim backlog of all claims in the system is 390,000, not including approximately 100,000 claims on appeal. There is no distinction in the system between a new claim, and a claim that is over one year old. When the data of claims over 180 days are reviewed, approximately 20-25% of the backlog fall into that category, so less than 100,000 claims have been in process over 6 months. The length of time it takes to process a claim averages between 70 and 160 days. Remands pending contribute to the backlog, however, the exact number of remands is not available, nor the number of new claims filed each year. The Under Secretary for Benefits is working with the field offices in addressing ways to improve the claim processing rate and decrease the backlog. These include: focused overtime, shared best practices ideas, increased access to data files, and decreased special projects.

Recommendations by Committee:

- Attendance at C&P training programs should be mandatory for VBA staff
- VBA consider reporting claims backlog in relation to the number of days a claim has actually been in the system. This would provide a more accurate accounting of exactly how many claims have been in the system for a prolonged (>180 days) period of time.
- Provide Committee data on the number of claims VBA receives annually.
- Provide Committee data on the remand rate and the average number of remands pending.

Mrs. Katherine Zeiler, Director, Women Veterans Health Programs

Mrs. Zeiler provided an overview of the Women Veterans Health Program, which is outlined in the handout. Since 1992, the number of women seeking VA health care has increased by 32 per cent, while the number of men has increased 2.2 per cent. Although women veteran utilization patterns vary dramatically from VISN to VISN, it is important to note that the same is true of the male veteran utilization pattern. So, the variation in utilization does not necessarily reflect a problem with the provision of gender-specific care. The VHA womens' program met or exceeded the *Healthy People 2000* goals for health promotion in primary prevention in all area's except the provision of TB vaccinations. In the secondary prevention screening, VHA also met or exceeded the expected standard.

The annual customer satisfaction survey done in our ambulatory centers is considered to be a gender-neutral survey. In the review of the survey results we found that it was not as sensitive to gender differences as we would like. We recommended that a specific study be done on women veterans' satisfaction but there is no funding available to do that in the near future. However, we were able to get enough funds to support a partnering between Dr. Rosenheck, NEPEC,

and the customer satisfaction team, to work to increase the sample size of women in the annual survey. This should help us get a better idea of how women veterans experience VA care. Current Issues include: eligibility reform, implementation of the women's health software package, maternity care and newborn care.

Recommendations by Committee: None

Dr. Jessica Wolfe: Research on Women Veterans (via teleconference)

The results presented today are the initial findings on a more comprehensive study on women veterans health status that was started by Dr. Katherine Skinner, who presented her preliminary findings to the Committee last June. The purpose of this segment of the research was to learn more about women veterans who use VA care; women veterans who used VA care in the past and for some reason cancelled their enrollment; and women veterans who have never used VA care. We anticipate that this information will help us develop better policies and programs to improve services to women veterans. The findings are attached. The study data appears to strongly confirm that women veterans are a growing population, of whom have distinctive care needs. Women who use VA have very high rates of less insurance, and higher physical and psychological health symptoms.

Recommendations by Committee:

- Data on military sexual trauma is currently presented so that Vietnam-era veterans are incorporated with WWII and Korean-era veterans. Consider separating out WWII and Korean-era veterans from Vietnam-era veterans and younger age groups.
- Do similar analysis of mental health problems among male veterans and non-veterans as is done on the female veterans. This would allow for more accurate comparison of military service on an individual's mental health.

Mr. Willie Hensley, Director, Center for Minority Veterans

Mr. Hensley provided an overview of the Center for Minority Veterans and discussed their current initiatives including:

- Oneida Sharing Agreement: VA has entered into a sharing agreement with the Oneida Nation that will allow them to provide health care to Oneida veterans through their community health plan. VA will reimburse the health plan for the services it provides eligible veterans
- Established Vet Centers on Native American Reservations including locations on reservations of the Cherokee Nation (Oklahoma); Sioux Nation (South Dakota); Hopi Nation (Arizona); Yakima Nation (Washington); and the Navajo Nation (Arizona)
- Increased outreach initiatives to reservation-based Native Americans, collaborated with the Center for Women Veterans to present information on women veterans' programs to the Native American Community

- Collaborated with other Federal agencies to publish and distribute Federal information and benefit manuals, in the Spanish language
- Established bi-monthly conference calls with over 150 minority veteran groups around the country
- Collaborated with DOD and VA's National Center for Veterans' Statistics to develop method to track the status of compensation and pension awards by ethnicity
- Provided support for the Advisory Committee on Minority Veterans

Recommendations: None

Individual Committee Member Briefings

Ms. Sherry Blede:

- ◆ Was recently appointed to the VFW's National Strategic Planning Steering Committee
- ◆ Was selected as a member of the VFW's Presidential forum, responsible for interviewing candidates running for the United States Presidential nomination
- ◆ Met with Vice President Gore and discussed increased funding for veterans' programs

Dr. Lois Johns:

- ◆ Joined a group of over 1500 veterans from Texas to discuss veterans' issues with Congressman Lamar Schmidt
- ◆ Involved with issues related to the availability of space at Veterans' cemeteries in Texas

Mrs. Janette McSparren:

- ◆ Participated in an all day retreat for the Management Advisory Committee (MAC) at the Albuquerque VAMC

Ms. Bertha Cruz Hall:

- ◆ Worked with representatives of the Texas State Legislature in coordinating an activity to honor women veterans on March 9, 1999

Captain Barbara Brehm:

- ◆ The Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Service (DACOWITS) will be holding it's Spring conference at the Dulles Hilton from the 28th of April to the 2nd of May. Any member of the VA Advisory Committee is invited to attend. If you are interested please call CAPT. Brehm and she will have a registration packet sent out to you.
1. Some of the speakers at the conference are:
Dr. Sue Bailey, DOD Under Secretary for Health Affairs
General Krulak, Commandant of the Marine Corp
Secretary of the Navy

MGEN Sedevé: Woman General in charge of equal opportunity for the South African Military and Defense Department

2. Some of the topics that will be discussed are:
 - Gender-integrated training
 - Violence against military women
 - Occupational specialties for women in the military
 - ◆ The new Chair of the DACOWITS is Ms. Mary Longsley. She is a police chief in Colorado, and the past commander of a police SWAT team
 - ◆ DACOWITS overseas trip this year will be to Asia. Bases in Okinawa, Korea and Japan will be visited.

Mrs. Veronica A'zera:

- ◆ Provided an overview of the current concerns of the VSOs in relation to the 106th Congress
- ◆ Discussed the recommendations of the independent budget developed by DAV, VFW, PVA and AMVETS
- ◆ Discussed the concerns the VSOs have identified with the proposed VA budget for FY 2000

COL. Christine Cook

- ◆ Presented an overview of the Ohio State Veterans' Homes to the Committee. She emphasized that although States receive some funding from VA to support the homes, they are run by the individual State, therefore policies and practices regarding admission criteria vary. She then discussed the services provided at the Ohio State Veterans Home and provided copies of her slides to the Committee.

III. Old Business

Topic: Advisory Committee on Women Veterans - 1998 Report

Discussion: The Committee's 1998 report has been reviewed by the appropriate program offices within the Department. Pending approval by the Secretary, the report and the Department's response to the report will be submitted to the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee. The Department did not concur with all of the Committee's recommendations. Any questions or concerns members have regarding the response can be addressed in the next report, or in follow-up correspondence to the Secretary. The Chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee determines whether or not hearings will be held to discuss the report and recommendations. They may also contact individual Committee members to discuss the report.

Action: The Committee will review the Department's response to their report at the next meeting in Washington and determine what items will require further action.

Topic: Sexual Trauma Brochure for Service Officers

Discussion: Mrs. A'zera, Ms. Ilem, and Mrs. Hall, reviewed the draft of the sexual trauma brochure that was developed for veterans service officers. The Committee approved the brochure with minor modifications. In order for VA to endorse this publication, it is necessary to send it through our internal concurrence process. Additionally, it must be sent to General Counsel to make sure the legal implications of a VA advisory committee, publishing materials for use by VSOs, is addressed.

Action: Ms. Furey will send the brochure to General Counsel for review and comment.

IV. New Business

Topic: Site Visit

Discussion: The Committee decided it would like to conduct a site visit in late June. They are particularly interested in visiting facilities that have been integrated as a result of reorganization. They also would like to have the opportunity to meet with Native American Women Veterans to discuss their ability to access VA services.

Action: Ms. Carson and Ms. Furey will try to arrange a site visit to VA facilities in the Seattle-Tacoma, Washington area. Ms. Carson will call individual Committee members as soon as the visit is confirmed and the dates have been arranged.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:30 pm

Respectfully submitted

Joan A. Furey
Executive Director
Advisory Committee on Women Veterans