

Calhoun County Veterans Affairs Committee Meeting

Minutes: October 8, 2014

Veterans Affairs Committee meeting called to order by Veterans Affairs Committee Vice-Chairman Jack Hunn at 2:45 P.M.

Pledge of Allegiance–Moment of Silence.



Roll-call of committee members:

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| • Chairman | Rodger Seidel, | Present – (Conference Phone) |
| • Vice-Chair | Jack Hunn | Present |
| • Secretary | Samuel Gray, | Present |
| • Member | George “Rob” Beam, | Present |

Calhoun County Veterans Affairs Office Staff:

- | | | |
|----------------------------|---------------------|---------|
| • Director | Scott C. Losey | Present |
| • Service Officer | Kristina S. Higgins | Present |
| • Administrative Assistant | M. Luann Cape | Present |

Calhoun County Administrator’s Office Representative:

- | | | |
|---------------------------|----------------|---------|
| • Administrator | Kelli Scott | Present |
| • Assistant Administrator | Bradley Wilcox | Present |

Citizens’ Time:

None.

Applications for Emergency Assistance from the Calhoun County Veterans’ Relief

Fund:

None.

Correspondence:

None.

Administrative Updates:

Calhoun County Assistant Administrator, Brad Wilcox, informed the Calhoun County Veterans Affairs Committee (CCVA-Committee) that the Calhoun County Veterans Affairs office budget has been submitted to the Calhoun County Budget Review Sub-Committee for review and subsequent approval without alteration(s). If, by happenstance, the Calhoun County Budget Review Sub-Committee should recommend changes to the proposed budget, Mr. Wilcox assured the CCVA-Committee that they will be advised in as timely a manner as possible for ensuing discussion and, if necessary, deliberative discourse.

Mr. Wilcox informed the CCVA-Committee that he has, in fact, made contact with the widely used internet website designer for the purpose of creating a more user friendly Calhoun County Veterans Affairs office website in conjunction with the modernization efforts already in process within the office. Mr. Wilcox shared that the website designer is located in the Chicago-land area and that the County, at large, has had an appreciable degree of success with this particular company. Of note, Mr. Wilcox was clear in advising the CCVA-Committee members that he would be able to provide quotes contingent upon the needs and requirements inherent to the goals and objectives of the modernization to the Calhoun County Veterans Affairs office website. The CCVA-Committee acknowledged, understood, and appreciated Mr. Wilcox's efforts to provide guidance in this endeavor.

Director Losey and Service Officer Higgins, both, stated that they are investigating county veterans affairs office specific computer software packages. In essence, Director Losey advised the CCVA-Committee that both he and Service Officer Higgins need to exercise due diligence in their investigative approach to insure that the software package ultimately chosen will work in concert with the Department of Veterans Affairs Regional Offices' "virtual VA" websites that seem to be in a continuous mode of change and updates. Presently, the Department of Veterans Affairs Regional Offices' provide "portals" for veterans to access their own information with a certain degree of confidence that their information will remain as tightly secure as possible. Director Losey indicated that many county veterans affairs offices within the State of Michigan have dedicated thousands of dollars to software packages that became defunct and outdated within a very short period of time; hence, many more thousands of dollars were required for either updated versions or completely new software packages. Director Losey reminded the CCVA-Committee that he, Service Officer Higgins, and Administrative Assistant Cape are extremely cautious and cognizant of how county tax dollars are spent; hence, a significant degree of responsibility to the investigate process must be undertaken to mitigate any possibility of potentially, yet inadvertently, wasting county tax dollars. Therefore, Director Losey noted that if additional time is necessary to identify the software package that will possess the greatest degree of "staying power," then that must be the direction undertaken – no guesswork undertaken. In summation, the Calhoun County Veterans Affairs office software must absolutely work in

conjunction with the Department of Veterans Affairs Regional Offices'; be applicable to working in conjunction with the various Veterans Service Organizations as they pertain to veterans claims advocacy; enable access to veterans' records that include service personnel records, service medical records, prior claims records, summary of benefits letters, separation from military service records, etc.; and capable of upgrades consistent with those that may be applied to the software packages utilized by the Department of Veterans Affairs Regional Offices'. In an effort to assist Director Losey with this pursuit of software, he will engage with the Michigan Association of County Veterans Counselors President and Washtenaw County Veterans Affairs office Director, Michael Smith. Mr. Smith is widely viewed as being an expert in the field of county veterans affairs office software packages. Director Losey advised the CCVA-Committee that his goal is to provide options before the end of the year.

Service Officer Higgins chimed in to advised that a representative from the State of Michigan's Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMVA) was in attendance at the Michigan Association of County Veterans Counselors annual Fall Conference. The representative informed the members of the Association that deliberations were underway to ascertain whether funding would be available from the State of Michigan's DMVA to offer grants to individual counties for the purpose of assisting in offsetting the monetary expenses inherent to the purchase specific county veterans affairs office software packages. The concern with this potential avenue of approach, however, is that the scope of software packages available would be limited to only what the State of Michigan's DMVA would allow for purchase. The question that begs to be answered, then, is whether the State of Michigan's DMVA endorsed software packages would, one, be ideal and, two, result in a mandatory agreement necessitating that the Calhoun County Veterans Affairs office disseminate and divulge various information to the State of Michigan's DMVA (as has been rumored to be the case). More information pertaining to this issue of significant consequence to come.

Mr. Wilcox encouraged the CCVA-Committee to actively engage in the process inherent to soliciting information that a vacancy currently exists on the CCVA-Committee. Vice-chair Hunn stated that he has advertised the opening within a couple of the Veterans Service Organizations for which he is a member within Calhoun County. Vice-Chair Hunn added that he is aware of a few veterans with whom have expressed interest in serving. Director Losey reminded the CCVA-Committee that the opening has, in fact, been published, at a nominal fee, within the Battle Creek Shopper with hardly no ensuing interest expressed. Director Losey suggested that the CCVA-Committee opening should, perhaps, be published, yet again, within the Battle Creek Shopper. Discussion encompassing the eligibility requirements ensued. Chairman Colonel Seidel proclaimed that he would make contact with the 110th Fighter Wing, Michigan Air National Guard Base to investigate whether anyone

who satisfies the eligibility requirements expresses interest for CCVA-Committee membership.

Calhoun County Administrator, Kelli Scott, addressed the CCVA-Committee concerning the restructuring of the “Committee” to be more widened and regional – perhaps up to and include five (5) counties. Ms. Scott stated of hearing that many active duty service soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines will, soon, be separating (discharging) from active duty military service thereby returning to the workforce. Ms. Scott’s concern emanated from the fact that she was not sure what resources were available recently separated military personnel, now, classified as veterans. Ms. Scott did, however, mention of hearing about a few “sub-committees,” one of which constituting a workforce development committee for veterans that went into effect October 1, 2014. Apparently, this newly devised committee will be in need of veterans.

Administrative Assistant Cape added that the military has an excellent “Boots to Business” workshop sponsored and endorsed by the United States Department of Labor that veterans are required to participate upon their return from deployment of 180 days or more coupled with their likelihood of having to re-enter the civilian workforce. One week is required, another three day workshop for entrepreneurship is optional.

Programs such as these are facilitated by both the branch of military service the military member may be discharging from as well as the Department of Defense. In addition, the United States Department of Labor as well as county Unemployment agencies have been extremely pivotal in, one, providing the newly separated veteran a counselor to tailor and translate their military experiences into the needs and occupational requirements within the civilian sector and, two, extending outreach to efforts to businesses and companies who look to capitalize on newly separated veterans who exhibit the work ethic demanded by military service in pursuit of the myriad of daily and operational objectives and missions. Calhoun County is fortunate to have many veteran resources right within the Calhoun County Veterans Affairs office backyard – the following constitute just a few:

- Michigan Air National Guard Base
- Michigan Army National Guard Base
- United States Marine Corps Reserve Base
- United States Naval Reserve Base
- United States Army Reserve Base (limited functionality)
- Veterans Affairs Medical Center
- Fort Custer National Cemetery
- Calhoun County Unemployment Agency Veterans Resource Officers (Jim Bishop, by far, the most resilient Veterans Counselor)

- Veterans Resource Team (composed of an ever growing 25-plus agencies)
- Local Posts and Chapters of Veterans Service Organizations
- Share Center to Assist with Veterans with Mental Illness
- Silver Star Apartments
- Hart-Dole-Inouye Federal Center
- Michigan Veterans Trust Fund
- **CALHOUN COUNTY VETERANS AFFAIRS**

Again, the aforementioned agencies constitute just a few of the many agencies, organizations, and committees, each premised upon serving the needs of all veterans from those few World War II veterans who still remain to the veteran with whom just discharged.

Vice-chair Hunn offered that a gentleman was working with the state to see if veterans could get credit at school for their time in service.

Minutes:

Committee member, Rob Beam, made a motion to accept the September 10, 2014 Calhoun County Veterans Affairs Committee Meeting Minutes as presented. Committee member, Sam Gray, Seconded the Motion. By a roll call vote, the September 10, 2014 Calhoun County Veterans Affairs Committee Meeting Minutes were unanimously accepted as presented.

Old Business:

Vice-Chair Hunn questioned why the CCVA-Committee was not reviewing applications for emergency relief from the Calhoun County Veterans Relief Fund on a more consistent basis. Vice-Chair Hunn stated that a conglomerate of identified Calhoun County Veterans Service Organizations contribute to an emergency relief fund for southwestern Michigan area. To date, Vice-Chair Hunn stated, this conglomeration of Veterans Service Organizations have distributed some \$6900 to veterans who, apparently, satisfy their established eligibility requirements (not clearly defined in entirety). Vice-Chair Hunn explained that one of the primary eligibility criterion necessitates that the applicant must have applied to and been denied by, both, the Michigan Veterans Trust Fund and the Calhoun County Veterans Relief Fund. Vice-Chair Hunn asked if applicants for emergency relief from the Calhoun County Veterans Relief fund who have been denied receive a denial letter. Director Losey responded by stating, “no.” Service Officer Higgins reminded the CCVA-Committee that applications for Calhoun County Veterans Relief are reviewed by the CCVA-Committee. Following the CCVA-Committee’s review, the applicant is verbally notified as to the final decision. In answering Vice-Chair Hunn’s initial question as to why veterans are not applying for emergency assistance from the Calhoun County Veterans Relief Fund, Director Losey stated,

plain and simple, “I do not know – the program is advertised, presented, and discussed with the same degree of comprehensiveness as all other programs and services facilitated within the Calhoun County Veterans Affairs office.” Service Officer Higgins added that there are a myriad of programs to help in a state of immediate need that seemingly are accessed well in advance than the Calhoun County Veterans Relief Fund.

Director Losey inquired if the Veterans Service Organizations’ (VSO) emergency relief fund distribute cash directly to veterans soliciting monetary assistance? Vice-Chair Hunn said no; they pay directly to vendor: gas station, grocery store, department store, etc. Vice-Chair Hunn further added that the (VSO) emergency relief program is not limited to Calhoun County veterans. Service Officer Higgins added that the last veteran who met the criteria for both emergency assistance programs had waited until his water was actually shut off before he requested monetary assistance. Because both the Michigan Veterans Trust Fund Committee and the Calhoun County Veterans Affairs Committee take time to review applications for emergency assistance, in the case of the veteran with his water shut off, Service Officer Higgins contacted Mrs. Ashley McKee Thompson, Veterans Resource Team – Volunteers of America Coordinator, and she was able to get the veteran’s water turned on the very next morning. Director Losey explained that the procedural protocol inherent to submitting an application for emergency assistance from the Calhoun County Veterans Relief fund simply cannot be that expeditious in processing.

Mr. Beam offered that we could automatically approve the staff up to a certain amount and, then, review the previous month’s transactions at the ensuing CCVA-Committee meeting. Director Losey responded by stating that before he and the staff felt comfortable with this procedural protocol, the regulatory standards would have to be ironclad in conciseness and absolutely clear to avoid unnecessary criticism levied by the CCVA-Committee to the Calhoun County Veterans Affairs office staff who may possess varying opinions concerning individual veterans needs coupled with whether the veteran satisfied the eligibility requirements necessary with emphasis on “unforeseen emergent need.”

Mr. Beam asked if the Veterans Service Organizations—as separately funded entities in and of themselves outside of the office—could serve as agents to disperse Calhoun County tax payer dollars on behalf of the Calhoun County Veterans Affairs office? Mr. Wilcox expressed that there would be significant fiduciary concerns and, essentially, no! Vice-chair Hunn added that the State of Michigan already appropriates funding for the VSO’s.

Vice-chair Hunn commented that the Veterans Resource Team is fulfilling one of the goals of the Strategic Planning: to collaborate with other people to avoid duplication of services. It is obvious that Ashley McKee Thompson is the individual primarily responsible for coordinating the ever growing number of agencies that have expressed interest in being a part of

the Veterans Resource Team. Service Officer Higgins added that anytime they get into an area that is broader than what they do, they defer to our office.

She further stated that the State of Michigan launched a new call center for Veterans. In some ways, we are ahead in our strategic plans.

Chairman Colonel Seidel acknowledge having facilitated a presentation at the 110th Fighter Wing, Michigan Air National Guard base before he ventured to Florida for a long winter break. Chairman Colonel Seidel mostly addressed issues pertaining to VA benefits and military retirements, and the advocacy provided by the Calhoun County Veterans Affairs office. Chairman Colonel Seidel noted that a followup presentation should be facilitated by both Director Losey and Service Officer Higgins.

Vice-chair Hunn asked Service Officer Higgins to ask Duane Kelly if he would be able to secure Department of Veterans Affairs – State of Michigan Department of Military and Veterans Affairs benefit booklets from Mike Nofs office. Director Losey offered that the Department of Veterans Affairs website has just put out the 2014 books that you need to download to print. County Administrator, Brad Wilcox, offered that the county has a high speed color-copier that would do it. Vice-chair Hunn said there was a digital copy of the Michigan booklet. Director Losey asked for Vice-chair Hunn to send him a digital copy of the booklet.

Director Losey and Service Officer Higgins met with Calhoun County Human Resources Director, Kim Archambault, last week to ascertain the transition of the current, temporary Administrative Assistant position, into a permanent one of Service Officer. Notification of the job should be going out anytime. It may already be internally posted, and that will occur for a few weeks before is it externally advertised. Work has been done on the job description, as well.

County Administrator, Brad Wilcox explained that the Board of Commissioners needs to authorize any changes in the job description, as well as any added personnel. There is no need to ask the Board to do anything at this time. Currently the positions of one director and two Service Officers are approved.

Director Losey stated that the current position is slowly going toward becoming a Service Officer.

Vice-chair Hunn asked what it means to be accredited. Director Losey explained that we are working with the State Service Office of Vietnam Veterans of America, Phil Smith, in Detroit, to become accredited. We have asked him if there is an opportunity for accreditation

through his organization to be done on line, that we would appreciate being able to participate in the process.

Vice-chair Hunn heard that the State of Michigan pays for accreditation training. Director Losey explained that would only occur if the National Organization of County Veterans Counselors training conference takes place in Michigan. If the training is out of state, the individual counties are obligated to pay.

Vice-chair Hunn stated that he heard the State of Michigan pays for the testing for accreditation and he thought Director Losey and Service Officer Higgins would pass the test. Discussion ensued concerning the point of being accredited. And he thought it should be one of our goals in strategic planning to become accredited. The point was made that plenty of “accredited” service officers ask our office questions about how to do things.

New Business:

VA Medical Center (VAMC) organizes the Stand down events.

Mr. Gray attended the “National Disabilities Awareness Celebration” and the topic was Post Traumatic Stress Disorder at the VAMC on Friday. A professor at Western Michigan University came to speak in recognition of National Disabilities month.

Vice-chair Hunn wondered if anyone attended the VAMC Service Officer meetings. The VA office staff were not aware that these meetings occurred. He also wondered if someone had an electronic copy of the Strategic Planning meetings. County Assistant Administrator Wilcox offered to get him one.

Strategic Planning Updates:

Assistant Administrator Wilcox reminded us that he had the responsibility of staff development and had discussed with Colonel Seidel director level staff evaluations for accountability purposes. What are the committee’s expectations for the director? Following the determination of expectations and doing evaluations, the process for outlining training and establishing goals for making progress in certain areas. Then it follows for other staff to work on developing areas that need improvement. Since the end of the year is coming up, it seems a logical time for setting expectations. Training was also within Mr. Wilcox’s realm of responsibilities, so he has made arrangements for Micro-soft office time tutorials. It would involve a four hour time block at the Justice Center. The training company supplies the laptop computers. He suggested that the office staff stagger the times we attend. It’s an intermediate level of Micro-soft office training. There is also LOGOS training. It would

include accounts receivable, to enable us to enter our own payroll, instead of Mr. Wilcox doing it. There is training on purchasing as well, and financial reports. Mr. Wilcox would pair Director Losey with a county subject expert and then Director Losey would decide if other staff would also benefit from the training. Director Losey agreed that it would be beneficial for our office to take advantage of these tutorials.

Chairman Seidel would appreciate everyone's input on the Veterans' Affairs by-laws, he would like to get a draft to each CCVA-Committee member by the end of October. County Administrator Wilcox asked Chairman Seidel if he had received the Senior millage by-laws, and he had, so he will send a copy to the Committee members. The reason Mr. Wilcox forwarded those minutes, is because they have been approved by corporate Counsel, therefore they would make an effective template. When the draft is complete, he will meet with Corporate Counsel, Richard Lindsey for his approval of the document.

County Administrator, Kelli Scott added that Mr. Lindsey writes a great deal of by-laws for corporations and new groups in the beginning stages of formation. Vice-Chair Hunn added that our by-laws should reflect the law that created the VA office and CCVA-committee, Act 192.

Chairman Seidel thought it would fulfill the outreach objective in the Strategic Plan to have an inter-active website. He suggested Director Losey meet with the county IT to plan it, before the end of the year.

Director Losey relayed a story about a family situation where a Veteran was told to be at the VAMC on a certain day to start a PTSD program. When he arrived, he was told he'd have to wait two more days. He had no place to go and it was wintertime. Service Officer Higgins was able to arrange a hotel room for the Veteran and his family for two nights, inside one business day. She did it in conjunction with the County finance Specialist, Wendy Slone. They both let go of everything that they were doing to assist that Veteran in his time of need.

Good of the Committee:

Nothing further.

Adjournment:

Mr. Gray made a motion to adjourn, Mr. Beam seconded the motion. Meeting adjourned 3:49p.m.

Jack Hunn
Vice-Chairman, Calhoun County Veterans' Affairs Committee

Scott C. Losey
Director, Calhoun County Veterans' Affairs