

Salem Town Hall Meeting Minutes

Mike Burton provided the Task Force overview and then opened the floor for questions and comments.

Wayne Crowder began by outlining the work he is personally doing with the Falls City Homeless Outreach. He has done a homeless count and has worked to bring veterans in to provide them benefits. ODVA provides a veteran service officer to help file claims on behalf of these homeless veterans. Wayne told a story about a female suicidal veteran who could not get care at the Portland VAMC during a suicidal episode because the VA could not confirm her veteran status. Mike Burton asked how Wayne is able to bring the homeless veterans to his events and Wayne explained it is due to building relationships one on one and building trust. A lot of these veterans don't trust the government and it takes time to build that trust. He also advertises his events in the local post office; he says these veterans may not have a home, but they keep a PO Box in these towns. Wayne said he would like to see more money spent on housing. He was told about the Oregon Housing and Community Services Department and information will be provided to him offline on this connection.

Ziggy Szczepanski explained the conservatorship program at ODVA and asked that the Task Force work to pass a law stating in cases where a veteran is rated incapacitated or incompetent to handle his/her own finances by a court of law, all payments (including VA) will be made to the court-appointed fiduciary. Ziggy explained that although Social Security and other government entities recognize the court-appointed fiduciary, the VA chooses its own payee regardless of the court-appointed fiduciary. (NOTE: ODVA has had this happen where it is the court-appointed fiduciary but the VA chooses a different payee for an ODVA client).

The wife of a Vietnam veteran and Desert Storm veteran herself asked that the Task Force change the law regarding property tax assessment breaks for disabled veterans. She would like the law to apply to all veterans regardless of disability status. She explained that she works for the Marion County Assessor and sees an unfair situation where only disabled vets 40 percent or more can receive the benefit; however, the widow of any vet (no disability needed for vet or widow) can have the benefit as well. She would like to see every vet get the benefit, which she says is very minimal at about \$150-\$250 per veteran homeowner. Mike Burton relayed that as a former legislator he is always concerned about the cost to local government and that he would like to see the numbers as to what such a bill would cost local government. Mike asked that staff provide him with the current law on the property tax assessment and the history of that law.

Richard Major said that it is impossible for a veteran to navigate the VA system without help. He said he has used ODVA and is happy with the help he has received, but the system is too complex for veterans. He also said his problem has not been the administration of the VA but the doctors who for years told him there was nothing wrong with him when there actually was. He was told that he was just trying to get narcotics and that they wouldn't treat him. His private-sector doctor found broken vertebrae from a

helicopter crash in Vietnam, which was causing his pain and medical problems. He would like to see the doctors be more accountable.

The wife of a World War II veteran explained her on-going appeal with the VA regarding her husband's PTSD and the frustration she has experienced by the bureaucracy. She also noted that although she thought the VA would cover her husband's medical costs because he is in Category I, that this is not accurate. She said he had a non-service connected emergency and the VA would not pay. Elan Lambert seconded that opinion, explaining she thought she was having a heart attack so she contacted the Roseburg VA to determine if they would pay for her emergency care at a private hospital. Roseburg said it depends on whether they think it is an emergency or not. Jack Heims explained the process and that it can be complex. In Elan's case, she ended up having kidney stones and although she thought it was a heart attack, the kidney stones may not be seen as an emergency situation or it may be depending on who at the VA sees it.

Chuck Ayers asked questions regarding the current tuition assistance offered through SB 1066 and if it could be applied to community colleges. Mike Burton outlined what Linn-Benton Community College and Clackamas Community College are doing for veterans. Tom Mann explained that SB 1066 was a private party's bill and that party will be putting in a new bill this session to include community colleges under the law. Chuck then asked why the cut off for dependents education is 23 years old. Mike Burton explained that under federal law, dependency for children ends at 23, which may be why that number is picked. Tom Mann confirmed this, explaining that it is in federal law for VA education and dependency benefits as well.

All the veterans noted that more information needs to be put out to veterans regarding what benefits are available and the information needs to be where veterans are, such as the Post Office. A suggestion was made to have the VAMC provide a card that explains their healthcare eligibility and rules so there is less confusion as to what the VA will cover and what it will not.

At the end of the meeting, Mike Burton asked each person to state if there were one thing they wanted fixed, what would it be. The following issues were identified:

1. Fix the process – look at the whole person instead of having to do claims piecemeal
2. Provide more information about federal and state benefits
3. Fix problem with property tax assessment program
4. Provide information on the Post 9/11 GI Bill
5. Work on finding veterans and provide them benefits
6. Do more specifically for women vets, especially those with MST
7. Provide housing for homeless veterans
8. Give information packet to vets when they file DD-214 with counties

The meeting adjourned at 9 p.m.