

**Commission to Strengthen and Align the Services Provided to Maine's Veterans
Second Meeting
Wednesday, October 28th, 2015
Room 437 State House – Augusta, Maine
9:00 am**

A G E N D A

*****Commission will break at approximately noon for one hour*****

I. Welcome and Introductions

II. Commission Member Discussion

- A. Review of procedures for developing findings and recommendations for final report – OPLA Analyst Danielle Fox
- B. Review of Oct. 7th presentations and discussion of potential findings and suggested recommendations (to date)

III. Presentations

- A. Colonel Andrew Gibson - Maine Military Community Network

MMCN's role in helping veterans access available services, benefits and resources

- B. Lorraine Spaulding – Coordinator of Veterans Services – Veterans Resource Center – University of Southern Maine

Providing services to help veterans transition from military service to successful completion of a college degree

- C. Tom Morrison – Tri-County Mental Health Services

Providing mental health care services to veterans in the community

IV. Commission Discussion of Potential Findings and Information Requests

- A. Review of day's presentations and discussion of findings and recommendations

V. Adjourn

Next meeting date Wednesday November 4, 2015 – 9:00am – 4:00pm

Commission to Strengthen and Align the Services Provided to Maine's Veterans
Meeting Notes from Meeting #1
October 7, 2015

I. Welcome and Introductions

Present: Senator Ron Collins (chair), Rep. Jared Golden (chair), Senator Earle McCormick, Rep. Louis Luchini, Rep. Jonathan Kinney, Adria Horn, Adrian Cole, Randall Liberty, Alley Smith, and Matthew Murphy. Absent: John Libby.

Commission staff: Danielle Fox and Karen Nadeau-Drillen.

Danielle reviewed the legislation, Resolve 2015, chapter 48, authorizing, the study – particularly the duties of the Commission. The Commission is budgeted to meet up to four times; additional meetings may be requested, but must be authorized by the Presiding Officers. The Commission is required to submit a report that includes findings and recommendations, including suggested legislation, to the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs (VLA) no later than January 15, 2016. The VLA Committee may report out legislation to the Second Regular Session of the 127th Legislature based upon the report.

II. Maine Bureau of Veterans' Services (BVS) Overview

Adria Horn, Director of the Maine Bureau of Veterans' Services (BVS) and a member of the commission, provided an overview of the Bureau – including veteran statistics and the Bureau's mission and future goals.

Veteran statistics:

- In federal fiscal year 2015, approximately 140,000 veterans reside in the State of Maine; this does not include about 15,000 to 20,000 military retirees. Maine has the third highest population of veterans per capita in the nation – approximately 10 percent of the state's overall population. (Maine's population is approximately 1.3 million.)
- A little more than one percent (1.2 - 1.3%) of veteran population in Maine is under 25 years of age. The national average is 1.4 percent. The veteran population 65 years of age and older in Maine is between 12,288 and 115,000.
- As of September 2014, there were 127,234 veterans (117,163 male and 10,071 female) in Maine (not including retirees). Of those, 94,604 had a wartime period of service – 35,478 Gulf War; 44,836 Vietnam era; 11,836 Korean conflict; and 6,340 World War II – and 32,630 are peacetime veterans.
- Rep. Golden asked for a breakdown of the Gulf War veterans – the first deployment versus the second deployment. Director Horn indicated that BVS would need to get those numbers from the federal Veterans Administration (VA) as the Gulf War period includes 1992 to the present.
- In Maine, the total veteran population decreased 17 percent between 2000 and 2015 – part of this decline is attributed to the number of older veterans who served in World War II, the Korean conflict and Vietnam era and have passed away.

- Commissioner member Alley Smith asked why the federal VA does not include retirees in their statistics regarding veterans.
- Rep. Golden asked if National Guard members who are not activated are considered “veterans.”
- Director Horn answered that the statistics are based on federal guidelines with regard to the term veteran.

Director Horn provided an overview of the state benefits for veterans which are administered by the Bureau of Veterans Services or for which the bureau assists with administration.

- Maine Veterans’ Homes;
- Maine Veterans’ Memorial Cemetery System;
- Tax exemptions for certain veterans;
- Free life-time day-use state park passes;
- Recreational licenses, such as hunting and fishing;
- Specialty license plates;
- Veteran Dependent Educational Benefits (VDEB);
- Recording and storage of copies of DD-214, military discharges; and
- Free representation by veteran service officers (VSOs) for enrollment in the VA benefits programs and VA case management assistance.

DD-214 Forms: Upon discharge from the military, veterans are issued a DD-214 for every period of active service. These forms contain vital information regarding the veteran with regard to his/her service, separation details and data used to determine eligibility for a wide array of services and benefits. BVS receives a copy of a DD-214 automatically upon discharge where the veteran has listed Maine as her/his home of record. They may also be sent to the bureau upon application for VA benefits in Maine. A system is not currently in place that would transfer a DD-214 to Maine if a veteran moves here from another state, unless they make contact in Maine with an entity such as VA/Togus or BVS. Commission chair, Senator Collins, asked if there was something that could be done at the state level to improve upon the number of DD-214s on file to be more in line with the number of veterans in the state. Director Horn indicated that this is primarily a Department of Defense issue and that a national-level program to digitize records is slated to begin in April of 2016.

Bureau service offices: Director Horn informed the commission about the seven veterans service offices under the purview of BVS located across the State. They are located in Caribou, Bangor, Machias, Waterville, Augusta, Lewiston and Portland. There are typically two staff people in each office – a veterans service officer (VSO) and a veterans services assistant (VSA). Because veterans regularly visit the Togus Veterans Administration Medical Center (VAMC), located in Augusta, Director Horn indicated that she often assigns the Machias VSO to provide service to veterans at the facility.

Commission member Randall Liberty asked Director Horn if she thinks the offices are appropriately located. Horn answered that the BVS Bangor office is the highest producing office and is co-located with a VA community-based outpatient clinic (CBOC). Horn believes it is wise to follow a similar pattern of co-locating offices with other offices of function that serve

veterans. It makes sense to locate multiple functions together from an administrative perspective, but more importantly for the ease of access afforded to veterans.

Rep. Golden asked if BVS needs more VSOs. Director Horn was hesitant to provide a firm number at this time but noted that the Bangor office could use some assistance.

Commission member Adrian Cole asked if the bureau has looked at mobile platforms. Director Horn said that the Bureau does provide mobile service currently; the Bureau holds office hours at itinerant offices two to three days per week.

In response to information cited by staff, Horn briefly discussed that the VLA Committee provided funding (Casino funded Veterans Coordinated Assistance Fund) to pay a majority of the costs for (non-BVS) VSOs from veteran service organizations, such as, the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans and Veterans of Foreign Wars, to provide VA enrollment and case management services to veterans at Togus. At Togus, a veteran can choose a VSO from one of these organizations, work directly with VA or connect with a BVS VSO when available. BVS has no formal communication or reporting system with these supported VSOs.

Maine Veterans' Memorial Cemetery System:

- Director Horn then discussed the Maine Veterans' Memorial Cemetery System. There are no national cemeteries in Maine— only four cemeteries that are maintained by the State – with two located in Augusta and one each in Caribou and Springvale. The VA grades the State against national cemetery standards despite the fact that Maine does not receive federal funding for its veterans cemeteries. The VA conducts a non-punitive assessment of state veterans' cemeteries; 80 percent is a passing grade. Maine received a grade of 85 percent at both of its Augusta veterans' cemeteries in August 2015. It is the Bureau's goal to achieve a national shrine standard for the veterans' cemetery in Springvale, which is scheduled to undergo an assessment in July 2016.
- Commission member Randall Liberty requested a copy of the August 2015 VA assessments of the Augusta veterans' cemeteries.

Maine Veterans' Homes:

- Director Horn provided a brief overview of Maine Veterans' Homes, which is a public non-profit (quasi-governmental) organization created by the Maine Legislature in 1977. The Director of BVS serves (ex officio) on the Board of Trustees of Maine Veterans' Homes.
- To qualify for admission, the applicant must be an honorably discharged veteran who served on active duty in the United States Armed Forces and must be a resident of Maine at the time of application or have resided in Maine at the time of entry into the United States Armed Forces. Spouses, widows or widowers, and Gold Star parents of eligible veterans may also be eligible for admission. For services, they accept 3rd-party insurance, including MediCare, funding from VA – including 100% reimbursement for clients with 70% disability (service-connected).
- Maine Veterans' Homes receive construction grants from the federal VA. Horn indicated that there will be a new veterans' home near Maine General Medical Center in Augusta.

Commissioner member Adrian Cole asked if Maine Veterans' Homes meet the need in the State. Horn indicated that there is currently a waiting list.

Medical/Mental Health Resources/Facilities:

- Director Horn continued her briefing by discussing medical and mental health resources and facilities for veterans in Maine. In addition to the VA Medical Center/Togus in Augusta, there are eight VA community-based outpatient clinics (CBOCs) in Maine. They are located in Saco, Lewiston, Caribou, Rumford, Portland, Bangor, Calais and Bingham (part-time). The minimum threshold for a community to qualify for a CBOC is 1,500 patients. There are also four Vet Centers (separate from VA and Maine BVS) which offer mental health services for combat veterans and provide assistance addressing military sexual trauma (MST). These are located in Sanford, Lewiston, Caribou and Portland. She also cited the VA Fee-for-Service/ Choice Card which can be used at participating community providers and clinicians.
- Director Horn raised an issue which has been a source of frustration for veterans. Many veterans do not have a clear understanding that what is provided by the VA is not health insurance, but rather a health benefit. What the VA provides is not comparable with other health-related benefit services which most people associate with insurance or reimbursement. Director Horn indicated that she wants to address this awareness issue so that veterans understand what assistance is available, how to get it from the VA and even the issue of "co-using" benefits provided from different entities. Horn believes that veterans need a more fundamental understanding of what the VA provides which will ultimately allow BVS to better identify gaps in services for veterans.

Homeless Veterans:

- Director Horn indicated that BVS doesn't have a way to assess whether Maine can get to "functional zero" in addressing homeless veterans. "Functional zero" is when the capacity to provide housing is sufficient to meet the understood need. The need is typically determined by a "point-in-time" survey of veterans who are experiencing homelessness. BVS does not have dedicated additional staffing or resources to address veterans' services relative to homelessness. As veterans service needs have increased, the Bureau is unable to respond to meet the demand. Rep. Golden cited the availability of private and government grants to disparate non-profit providers and community-based organizations to address homelessness among veterans - but noted that there is no sense of coordination or partnership to maximize the resource to result in the best outcomes. Additionally, Rep. Golden indicated that it would be helpful to know how the intended objectives of the grants are quantified in terms of success.
- Horn's PowerPoint presentation listed homelessness providers with a specific focus on veterans: Preble Street/ Oxford Street in Portland; Veterans, Inc. in Lewiston (serves men only); Bread of Life Ministries in Augusta; Betsy Ann Ross House of Hope in Augusta (will serve women only); and MaineHousing.
- At the beginning of the meeting, staff provided Commission members with a summary of efforts in the State of Connecticut to address the problem of homelessness among veterans - citing that state's Governor's recent declaration of successfully resolving chronic veteran homelessness by (reportedly) achieving functional zero.

Veterans' Recognition Program:

- Director Horn then discussed the Veterans' Recognition Program, including, but not limited to, certificates of appreciation for wartime service, wartime plaques in the Hall of Flags of the State House, and State honorable service medals.

The Way Ahead: Key issues identified by the Bureau of Veterans' Services

Outreach/Marketing:

- People get information in so many different ways and the Bureau doesn't have the staffing to address the need, but integrative efforts can improve the process. BVS is overhauling their website to improve outreach efforts. The Maine BVS website can serve as an entry point for veterans. BVS is updating and upgrading their website with the goal of being a one-stop point of entry for Maine veterans, family members, veteran groups and stakeholders. The BVS website can serve as a portal or access point not only for BVS administered services and benefits but also for those administered and offered by other state agencies and non-government organizations.
- Horn believes an increase in marketing efforts is needed. There has never been an outreach budget. Currently, the seven VSOs in Maine are handling 42,000 open cases.
- As part of her presentation, Director Horn stressed that priority for her is to increase marketing and overall bureau visibility. In essence, she noted she wanted to put a stop to "I didn't know you existed."
- In response to questions about TAPS (Transition Assistance Program for newly discharged members of the military) and whether it serves as a good opportunity for outreach to veterans – Director Horn indicated that since Maine has no military base, there is no concentrated stream of returning members who BVS can target in person. She indicated that 60% of "welcome home" letters, that are mailed upon BVS receiving DD-214s where a veteran lists Maine as residence of record, are returned because they did not reach the veteran. The idea of a once-per-year state-level TAPs event is a worth exploring according to Horn, but it would be crucial to ensure that the means of contacting veterans would bring them into the program and that the program itself would be state-specific.

Case-management platform:

- It is a priority of BVS to add case-management technology to provide holistic veterans' services and track provided benefits and communication.
- Director Horn indicated that the lack of a case management platform within the Bureau is crippling the agency. She cited specific examples of how assisting a veteran, in relatively simple matters, is inefficient and overly time-consuming, because of the absence of this important tool. While it would require financial investment, she believes it would be a worthwhile and generational investment. The Bureau believes it needs to make sure that they are closing the loop in their service to Maine's veterans.
- Rep. Golden asked Director Horn to explain how case management technology ties into the mission of the Bureau. Horn feels it is critical. Currently, the Bureau is operating under "a single point of failure." Rep. Luchini asked if BVS has a recommendation for a case management system that would work best for Maine. Horn indicated that the

Bureau has looked into various platforms including a visit the Bureau of Corrections for a look at their system. BVS is weighing the costs and benefits of an off-the-shelf platform versus a State-designed platform.

- Rep. Golden added that it is a challenge for BVS to identify veterans in the State who are coming off active duty – which highlights the importance of VSOs who work with veterans in filing claims – and connecting with the federal government.
- Provide veteran advocacy, advocacy, outreach and community/stakeholder integration for employment, mental health, education, homelessness and legacy of service.
- Tightly integrate Maine Veterans' Memorial Cemetery System with State/federal benefits.
- Veterans History Project (federal project) gathers/records/documents veterans' personal stories. Currently, there is no State equivalent. BVS has approached the Governor's Office for support for creating a similar project in Maine called the Veterans Legacy Project.

III. Hire 100 Veterans in 100 Days Campaign

Julie Rabinowitz, Director of Communications with the Maine Department of Labor (MDOL), provided an overview of services provided by MDOL's CareerCenter, including Maine's Hire-A-Vet Campaign.

Maine veterans and eligible spouses receive priority of service in all CareerCenter programs. Veterans and eligible spouses are given priority of service for the receipt of employment, training and placement services under most MDOL-funded programs. The CareerCenter has specific veterans services staff: local veterans employment representatives (LVERs) and disabled veterans employment representatives (DVERs?).

Maine's Hire-A-Vet Campaign kicked off on September 7, 2015. The campaign lasts 100 days with the goal of signing up at least 100 employers who will, in turn, hire at least 100 veterans. To date, 112 employers have signed up for the program and 46 veterans have been hired (of those, at least two were homeless).

Commissioner member Adrian Cole asked why an employer who doesn't or hasn't actually hired veterans receives high-profile recognition as part of the program. Rabinowitz replied that one of the goals of the campaign is to educate employers about the benefits of hiring veterans. Getting employers into the program, according to Rabinowitz, creates the opportunity to inform employers about the many advantages of hiring veterans and the workforce benefits they bring. Rabinowitz indicated a goal of the program is ongoing support and education. Cole pointed out that campaign materials do not promote the many benefits of hiring a veteran and that it's his belief that many veterans do not want to self-identify as a veteran for fear that they will be perceived as a liability rather than an asset. Rabinowitz replied that the program offers more than what is highlighted on some of the promotional materials that are so visible stating that MDOL does point to employers the many benefits of hiring a veteran, such as, technical skill and promptness. Commissioner member Adria Horn stated that the program has been well-received and will help veterans with employment challenges. She noted that she appreciated Adrian

Cole's comments about being sensitive to the campaign's approach to recognize that veterans are not victims, but value-added employers.

Commissioner member Randall Liberty pointed out that veterans fit very well into positions at the Department of Corrections. In fact, the Department has recently hired six veterans.

Adria Horn asked if MDOL's LVERs are receiving training (specific to veterans?). Rabinowitz indicated that LVERs do get certain training through US DOL as well as MDOL.

Rabinowitz also pointed out that Maine's workforce is currently approximately 700,000 (out of about 1.3 million residents). MDOL projects that the workforce in Maine will decrease by 100,000 in the next 15 years. Rep. Golden asked Rabinowitz to talk more about Maine's future workforce needs. She stressed the importance of attracting young families to Maine. The number one factors contributing to the declining workforce in Maine is the lack of births (rather than "brain drain" as often assumed). Young families buy larger homes to accommodate family, buy more clothes and other products, which contributes significantly to the State gross domestic product (GDP).

Rabinowitz also mentioned that the Maine Office of Information Technology (OIT) is offering internships for Maine veterans. MDOL has also partnered with the Department of Professional and Financial Regulation (DPFR) to address issues relating to occupational licensing and certifications. Commission staff provided a hand-out to Commission members summarizing recent steps that Maine and other states have taken to streamline the process for veterans and their spouses transferring or obtaining occupational licenses and certifications.

IV. Veterans Health Administration, Togus

James Doherty from the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) spoke about the VA's mission and efforts to provide health care to Maine's veterans.

According to Doherty, there are approximately 128,000 veterans in the State of Maine. The population of veterans in Maine is declining due to the declining number (mortality) of older veterans, primarily WWII. About 14.5 million veterans were activated during WW II. Newer veterans may be deployed several times, but that is still counted as one veteran. Many older veterans are also migrating to warmer climates.

Rep. Golden asked if the decreasing population of veterans raisings any concerns. Doherty responded that the services will not decline even if the population does. About 51,500 veterans are enrolled for VA services. VHA Togus actively serves about 42,000. Furthermore, 35 to 40 percent of Maine veterans receive mental health services.

Vet Centers represent a stand-alone program that was established in 1980. Many Vietnam veterans were not comfortable with the federal government. There are over 350 vet centers across the nation. Vet centers provide readjustment services for veterans as well as MST

services. All vet centers are authorized to hire family and child (pediatric?) counselors or license clinical social works (LSCWs).

Based on her experience as an advocate for veterans, Commission member Alley Smith pointed out that there is a three-month waiting list for mental health services. Doherty replied that nine years ago there were 900 full-time equivalent (FTE) employees, in 2015 there are 1,450 FTE employees.

A Commission member asked how the State can assist the federal VA? Doherty recommended that the State should send veterans to the VA. Some veterans feel like they are “eating someone else’s lunch” if they use VA services.

Commission member Adria Horn pointed out that the VA get a certain amount of money for each veteran. A veteran must be seen every two years, which is the minimum threshold. The VA gets money based on a veteran’s medical needs. If more veterans are sent to the VA, the VA will receive more money to also do other things which benefit veterans in Maine.

Director Horn also spoke about an ongoing issue. The Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has been trying to reduce the number of veterans in the MaineCare system by referring veterans to the VA. However, Horn indicated that if the move is not good for the veteran, BVS will not necessarily refer the veteran to the VA. For example, MaineCare will cover alternative therapies where the VA will not. MaineCare provides transportation; whereas, VA does not.

Re-education is important for older veterans that have been in the system for a long time.

It is very difficult to determine how many homeless veterans are in Maine. Maine has only one “wet shelter,” which is a shelter where the residents can drink alcohol.

V. Veterans Benefits Administration, Togus

Philip Black from the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) presented information about the VA’s mission and efforts to assist veterans in accessing their benefits, such as, disability, education and employment.

Black explained that while both VBA and VHA operate under the auspices of the VA, they are distinctly separate entities. VBA provides compensation, pension, survivor, education, vocational rehabilitation and employment (VR&E), and insurance services. In addition, online VBA services include Ebenefits, VSOs, in-person at 248, and national call centers.

Black provided statistics relating to the veteran population in Maine:

- Males – 117,163 (23,293 – receiving compensation – 20 percent)
- Females – 10,071 (1,791 – receiving compensation – 18 percent)
- Total – 127,234 (25,084 – compensation – 20 percent overall)

Black noted that VBA’s compensation figures are strictly service-connected compensation. The GI Bill is separate and VBA does not have the Maine figures yet.

In determining whether a veteran's disability is service connected, VBA looks at three factors: 1) injury or illness; 2) current condition; and 3) medical nexus. Disability benefit questionnaires (DBQs)?

Regarding pension, some of Maine's older veterans served between the Korean Conflict and the Vietnam Era. A veteran must have at least one day of wartime service to qualify for pension.

Black spoke briefly about Maine's current law changes relating to taxable income on military retirement.

Black indicated that 102,150 Maine veterans do not receive VBA benefits (this does not include pension figures).

Commissioner member Matthew Murphy pointed out that it is important to nail down the number of veterans, including retirees, in the State of Maine. The Commission has gotten three different sets of figures from BVS, VHA and VBA.

Jeff Jones from Maine VBA spoke about the vocational rehabilitation and employment (VR&E) program. In order to qualify for the program, a veteran must have a service-connected disability. Approximately three percent of eligible Maine veterans are in the program which translates to approximately 700 veterans. VBA gets approximately 500 VR&E applications in Maine per year. Jones indicated that Maine VBA processes applications in a very timely manner and is one of the fastest in the country compared to other states. Commission member Adrian Cole inquired about the utilization rate in other states. About 78 percent of the 700 Maine veterans enrolled in the VR&E program are in an active training program or have completed training and are looking for employment.

According to Jones, VBA's greatest challenges are: education veterans about what is available to them; and obtaining veteran service treatment records (STRs) for National Guard and Reserve veterans.

Maine VBA is an intake site for pension benefits; straight pension claims are decided in Philadelphia.

Are there VBA programs that are not available in Maine? How far do veterans have to travel to access them? Insurance, education and loan guarantee. No travel required – phone, online, national call centers and Internet.

Overview of claims processing at Togus and put it into context with the national claims processing backlog.

- Current Togus inventory (rating related – 4,013 – 1,200 Maine)
 - Backlog defined as 125 days (730 – 26% - Maine 79 – 7%)
 - Completed in FY 15 – 20,117 – Maine 4,588
- Nationally (369,890 – 76,623 – 20% backlog)

VBA's motto is: "It's the nation, not the station." Maine is processing out-of-state claims.

VBA was asked “how can the State best help VBA carry out its mission? Black responded with: increased education and outreach, more Fortis access????, and BVS’s website (one-stop portal).

Commission member Adria Horn (BVS Director) asked whether there might be a way to combine technology capabilities with VBA – an opportunity to integrate between BVS and VBA. Black spoke about “Digital to Digital” (D to D) – which is a stakeholders’ enterprise portal. D to D goes directly in VBA’s system.

VBA feels that it has a very collaborative and strong relationship with BVS. Jones also spoke about the importance of the partnership between VR&E and MDOL. He encouraged the State’s support of MDOL’s CareerCenters. Again, outreach and marketing was emphasized.

VBA listed the following as outreach and marketing efforts to inform veterans of available benefits in Maine: VBA partners with VHA on different events; more participation in town halls; community events; homeless shelters; elder services events. Black pointed out that resources are limited; therefore, outreach is an ancillary duty of VBA.

Commission member Adrian Cole pointed out that many younger veterans do not feel like they are being heard by the VA. The VA may want to consider a different format so that veterans can see and feel that their comments are being taken seriously. Young veterans need to see that’s it’s a give-and-take relationship between the veteran and the VA. Black suggested that in some cases there may be a lack of understanding about how the VA is constrained by laws.

Senator Collins spoke briefly about the Kittery Shipyard’s apprenticeship program. According to Senator Collins, it is a two-year program and upon completion of the program, the person is guaranteed to have a job at Pratt & Whitney. Commissioner member Alley Smith added that Portsmouth Naval Shipyard in Kittery, Maine is an active duty installation.

Jones also encouraged funding for the State university system to protect veteran programs at schools. Rep. Golden added that peer mentoring is very important and agreed that the State should support services at universities for student veterans. Commission member Matthew Murphy spoke about what the University of Maine has done to support student veterans. Veterans Day is now a school holiday. Murphy talked briefly about research that shows schools that have faculty members who are veterans retain more student veterans. Faculty veterans help student veterans in the classroom environment. The white paper was authored by the president of a student veteran group at Harvard.

Black spoke briefly about homeless veterans. According to the Maine State Housing Authority, there were 438 veterans at publicly funded shelters in Maine in January 2015. This figure does not include privately-funded shelters or encampments. VBA indicated that homelessness among veterans has decreased over time. Black pointed out that the VA uses the federal Housing and Urban Development (HUD) definition of homeless.

Commission member Matthew Murphy requested more information about the GI Bill – the percentage of veterans utilizing the GI Bill and the percentage of veterans who have successfully completed postsecondary degrees.

According to presenters, \$10 to \$15 billion is currently being spent on education benefits for veterans.

Commission adjourned.

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Commission to Strengthen and Align Services Provided to Maine Veterans

Discussion worksheet – October 28, 2013 Points of consideration, potential findings, suggestions for possible recommendations

Compiled from suggestions for discussion provided by Commission members based on October 7th meeting summary

For discussion purposes only – not to be considered a comprehensive list or representative of commission decisions as of 10/28/15

✓ Point of consideration, potential finding	Comment – additional points	Possible recommendation
<p>Demographics, Data and Statistics</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Statistics and data regarding veterans is inconsistent among agencies who provide services and administer benefits to veterans in Maine 2. Veteran data are often exclusive of military retirees. 3. Data regarding the number of veterans experiencing homelessness varies among various agencies and non-governmental providers. 		
<p>Homelessness</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Veterans experiencing homelessness is a significant problem in the state and the state does not have a specific program or dedicated staff to address this issue 2. According to the VA – The number of veterans receiving service from homeless shelters was 438 in January of 2015 (does not include privately funded shelters) 3. The state has been granted 168 VASH vouchers 4. Grants and funds are available and disbursed among various providers, agencies and communities but the effectiveness of the services they fund is unclear. Coordination to maximize multiple grants does not seem to be happening 		<p>Fund a dedicated position within BVS for connecting veterans in need with permanent housing</p>
<p>Identifying veterans/outreach and marketing</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There are thousands of veterans in the state who are not receiving benefits and services to which they are entitled because they are not enrolled in the VA system or BVS does not have the information to contact them. 2. It is estimated that 76,500 veterans in Maine are NOT enrolled in VA health benefit. 3. BVS does not currently have the capability to identify veterans in 		<p>Dedicate funding for outreach systems and staff</p>

	<p>Maine that came from another state (Maine not listed as home state on DD214, not enrolled in VA, or information not communicated via VA)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Outreach and marketing are critical to ensuring that veterans receive the benefits and services they have earned. 5. Funding for outreach and “marketing” is insufficient. 6. BVS strives to send staff to veterans events state-wide in an effort to be connected, coordinated and visible to the veteran community 		
	<p>Communication</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reserve units represent a specific population gap for the state with regard to communication and notification of their veteran status 2. Veteran information system compatibility between the state and federal government as well as DD-214 record access would benefit and enhance outreach effort. The Dept. of Defense is working on issues to address this 3. The significant lack of awareness of the Bureau of Veterans Services among Maine veterans is unacceptable. 4. BVS should be the primary information source for Maine Veterans regarding services and benefits and provide a single point of entry to access benefits and services provided by other agencies and organizations. 5. Multiple and modern communication modalities must be used to ensure BVS is reaching veterans. 6. The current provision for an outreach specialist in BVS allows for a 2-year contracted position. This may not be the best fit for establishing and executing a long-term plan for critical outreach efforts. 		
	<p>BVS operations</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The lack of appropriate case-management technology results in inefficiency, poor customer service, and unnecessary frustration for service officers and veterans needing assistance. It is crippling to the bureau to be without this effective and valuable tool. 2. A case management platform is critical to the operation of the Bureau of Veterans Services and the important work of its veterans service officers 		<p>Fund and support an effective case management platform.</p>

<p>Geographic diversity of veterans/location of services</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. BVS regional Veterans Service Office locations should be examined to see if they align with the changing veteran demographics. 2. Currently, one service officer is covering two VSO locations 3. Regional Veteran Service Offices experience greater veteran traffic and utilization when co-located with other services utilized by veterans (cited example: Bangor which is co-located with VA CBOC – community based outpatient clinic) 	<p>Commission should learn more about the efforts and accomplishments of the VA Rural Health Advisory Committee</p>
<p>VA claims generally</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The process for filing claims with the VA is complex and lengthy. 2. BVS VSOs are best equipped to understand the process and provide assistance to veterans navigating claims. 3. Filing claims electronically is new and expanding technology for veterans seeking benefits and compensation. 	
<p>Mental health care access</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Thirty-five to 40% of veterans in Maine are seeking mental health care services according to the VA. However, the VA in Maine does not provide a sufficient level of services to meet that need and lacks a comprehensive inpatient treatment facility in Maine. (closest is MA which provides a 4-6 week program) 2. Too many veterans are placed on waiting lists for receipt of mental health care. 	
<p>Maximizing services and benefits between VA and state</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Efforts to un-enroll veterans from MaineCare insurance to federal VA health benefits is not necessarily in the best interest of the veteran or the veteran's family. (Transportation services covered by MaineCare cited as a specific example) 2. MaineCare is insurance where what the VA provides is a health benefit. There is a significant lack of understanding about the distinction. 3. Maximizing the health benefits provided by the VA and utilizing 	<p>Directive to state agencies (DHHS) should be to maximize all available benefits and not rely on one state or federal agency to provide all services needed by veterans.</p>

	<p>MaineCare as needed best serves veterans who are eligible for MaineCare.</p> <p>4. Approximately 28% of veterans in New England are not eligible for VA Health Benefits (service connected health needs)</p>		
	<p>Transportation</p> <p>1. Transportation to VA health care facilities and Togus proves to be a significant barrier to access to care by veterans, particularly elderly veterans who no longer drive and those who reside in rural parts of the state</p>		
	<p>Employment</p> <p>2. The rate of unemployment is higher as it applies to veterans in Maine, than non-veterans.</p> <p>3. The percentage of Maine veterans currently unemployed is 8.5% of the veteran population.</p> <p>4. 10-12% of veterans aged 18-30 are unemployed.</p> <p>5. There are benefits to employing veterans which should be communicated to employers.</p> <p>6. Approximately 3% of veterans use available federal vocational rehab services. 20% of veterans are eligible.</p> <p>7. The program sees a 78% success rate.</p>		
	<p>Deceased Veterans – cemeteries</p> <p>1. The Maine Veterans Memorial Cemetery is well-managed and valued by citizens of the state, generally as well as veterans and their families. The likely attainment of National Shrine Status is a significant achievement and a testament to the bureau's good work.</p>		
	<p>Honoring veterans</p> <p>Oral histories and documented accounts of service by Maine veterans are important to our state's heritage and an appropriate way to honor those Mainers who have served.</p>		<p>Support and participate in a Veterans History Project.</p>