

Commission to Strengthen and Align the Services Provided to Maine's Veterans
Meeting Notes from Meeting #4
December 2, 2015

I. Welcome and introductions

Present: Senator Ron Collins (chair), Rep. Jared Golden (chair), Senator Earle McCormick, Rep. Jonathan Kinney, Adria Horn, Adrian Cole, Alley Smith, Randall Liberty and John Libby (via phone). Commission staff: Danielle Fox and Karen Nadeau-Drillen.
Absent: Rep. Louis Luchini and Matthew Murphy.

II. Presentation: Western Maine Transportation Services

The Commission has spoken at length about transportation, which has been cited as a significant barrier to providing assistance and services to veterans by providers and volunteer organizations established to address veterans' needs.

Craig Zurhorst, community relations director, and Sandy Buchanan, general manager, with Western Maine Transportation Services spoke about their organization. Western Maine Transportation Services (WMTS) is a nonprofit public transportation corporation which serves Androscoggin, Franklin and Oxford Counties. Ms. Buchanan noted that some transit providers focus on fixed route transportation (commonly in urban areas) while other providers focus on para-transit, which is demand-response transportation, such as personal vehicles, minivans and handicap accessible vehicles (commonly in rural areas).

WMTS provides transportation to the Veterans Administration (VA) community-based outpatient clinic (CBOC) in Lewiston from areas in Western Maine such as Farmington, Rumford and Oxford Hills; however, Mr. Zurhorst noted that ridership is not as robust as it has been in the past. WMTS also offers transportation through grants via the United Way and Seniors Plus and WMTS can provide free transportation to veterans. WMTS does not have a program specifically for veterans, but they do have other organizations that can purchase tickets for veterans.

Senator Collins commented that there seems to be a lack of communication regarding what is available for transportation. Mr. Zurhorst suggested that a call center similar to the 2-1-1 Maine program, which is Maine's health and human services information and referral system, be set up for veterans to serve as a single point of contact for veterans.

Rep. Golden asked about the purchase process at WMTS. Ms. Buchanan explained that the Maine Department of Transportation (MaineDOT) does provide some money for vehicles; most of the vehicles at WMTS are funded by the state or federal government. Mr. Zurhorst added that fleet refreshment and expansion is very difficult. Congress is about to finalize a five-year federal highway funding bill. The need for public transportation is rapidly escalating because of Maine's aging population. However, Maine is at a slight disadvantage because of its low population as federal dollars tend to go to more populated states.

Rep. Golden referred to the State of Washington's efforts to help military veterans with their transportation needs. Commission members were provided with a copy of an article about state-level interagency coordination concerning veterans' transportation in various states published by the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) in September of 2012. According to Mr. Zurhorst, the State of Washington exemplifies what is possible by allowing cross-regional cooperation, which is missing in the State of Maine.

Rep. Golden asked if there was a unit of measure in terms of cost of services that WMTS provides. Mr. Zurhorst replied that there is no particular magic dollar amount; however, if we think of this as public transportation rather than veterans' transportation, it makes the argument for more public transportation funding more tenable. Ms. Buchanan added that the average cost per ride to her organization (not fare cost) is approximately \$10 per ride – as WMTS serves both urban and rural areas. Mr. Zurhorst added that he is very concerned that the Veterans Choice program is not available to get people to Togus or Boston.

Rep. Golden noted that the State of Maine has some veterans on MaineCare, but there have been efforts to move veterans to the VA system to save the state money. Rep. Golden asked if it would be possible to provide partial MaineCare benefits to veterans as MaineCare provides a transportation benefit, but the VA does not. Mr. Zurhorst replied that providers would need to speak with all three transportation brokers in the state (Logisticare, Penquis and Waldo Cap) to see if they could work with a hybrid system. Mr. Zurhorst cautioned that the Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) will likely chafe at the prospect of using administrative dollars for veterans' service. Mr. Zurhorst also pointed out that volunteer drivers cannot be reimbursed under the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) rules.

III. Work session – Part One

Refer to hand-out titled "Report Development worksheet" presented by Commission staff Danielle Fox.

Points of consideration include: demographics, data and statistics; homelessness; identifying veterans/outreach and marketing; BVS operations; geographic diversity of veterans/location of services; VA claims generally – non-BVS veteran services officers (VSOs); communication; mental health care access; maximizing services and benefits between the VA and the State; transportation; education; employment; deceased veterans – cemeteries; and honoring veterans.

Transportation:

See pages 7 and 8 of the Report Development worksheet. Senator Collins remarked that the Commission should pursue the transportation issue. Rep. Golden agreed and feels that the lawmakers should be talking with MaineDOT and regional transportation providers. Ms. Fox summarized that the Commission seems interested in three areas: increasing access to transportation for veterans through MaineDOT; allowing a veteran to be a "co-user" of both MaineCare and VA health benefits (allowing those covered by the VA to have access to the MaineCare transportation benefit); and increasing coordination between the state and federal

government in meeting the transportation needs of veterans. Currently, there is no transportation coverage under the Choice program.

Commission member Randall Liberty asked if there is a mileage reimbursement for CBOCs. Commission member Adria Horn, director of the Bureau of Veterans Services (BVS), replied that a veteran's disability rating is tied to the reimbursement rate; a veteran must be 30 percent disabled, at a minimum, in order to qualify this benefit.

Mr. Liberty asked if anyone knows the scope of the transportation problem. What is the unmet need in this regard? Mr. Liberty noted that it is difficult to bring resources to bear unless we know the numbers. Commission member Adrian Cole agreed that it is hard to quantify. However, Mr. Cole sees many veterans at the post level with transportation needs - from young veterans with car trouble to older veterans whose ability to drive is declining.

Commission member General John Libby commented that the conversation regarding transportation should be with MaineDOT; if a veteran is otherwise qualified for MaineCare's transportation benefit, but covered by the VA health benefit then we should cover the veteran's transportation. General Libby suggested expansion of the Choice Card program. Mr. Cole pointed out that there is a perception issue among veterans; some veterans want to stay with VA benefits even though that person qualifies for MaineCare. Rep. Golden added that the Choice program is not being offered as robustly as it could be; the network is strong, but veterans cannot access the transportation network. Director Horn noted that Choice program changes are forthcoming, including broadening of coverage and changing enrollment criteria. However, Director Horn does not yet know the impact on Maine veterans. The problem is that the VA does not actively recruit veterans and medical providers to enroll in the Choice program.

Rep. Golden commented that we need flexibility from the VA to get veterans to their medical appointments. Other states are making it work; other states have negotiated reduced fares (Boston, Massachusetts, for example).

Ms. Fox suggested combining the four transportation recommendations into two. The first recommendation, which is more immediate, is to change rules to allow veterans to co-use benefits – MaineCare and VA health benefits. The second long-term recommendation is to require agency heads to get together for the purpose of establishing a method to determine the need. Rep. Golden noted that the State of Washington rolled out a similar program as a pilot project. Commission member Alley Smith added that data is important to obtain funding and that veteran service officers (VSOs) could play a role in collecting that data. Rep. Golden agreed that the state needs to explore amending the rules relating to the MaineCare transportation benefit to allow for a partial coverage option for veterans – for example, a MaineCare ride for a VA appointment.

Demographics, data and statistics:

See page 1 of the Report Development worksheet. The Commission voted in the following two recommendations:

- 1) Require coordination among agencies or designate a single agency as the data source regarding the number of veterans in Maine. In addition to veterans, maintain a count of military retirees and consider tracking (non-veteran) National Guard members who have completed service, including their survivors.
- 2) Fund and coordinate outreach efforts, which will improve accuracy of veteran population count – including case management system and permanent veterans outreach specialist.

Director Horn noted that BVS has reviewed six case management system demonstrations and found one that meets BVS needs (central office, claims, demographics, cemeteries) at the most reasonable cost. The initial cost for initial implementation of the preferred platform is approximately \$60,000, including maintenance for one year. The ongoing annual cost for maintenance is an estimated \$30,000.

Rep. Golden reiterated the recommendation that the current two-year contract position of veterans outreach specialist should be made permanent, which dovetails with marketing funding. BVS should receive a marketing budget. Rep. Golden noted that the challenge is to come up with an exact figure for the cost of marketing and outreach. Ms. Fox commented that the Commission could recommend amending the statutory duties of the Bureau to include marketing and outreach and the cost of these new duties will be developed through the fiscal note process.

Rep. Golden asked whether BVS has the resources/budget to conduct more robust outreach. Ms. Fox pointed Commission members to Page 5 of the worksheet relating to BVS operations where there is a preliminary recommendation to increase funding for travel expenses, including compensatory time, for VSOs. The Commission voted in favor of this recommendation.

Outreach and marketing:

See pages 3 and 4 of Report Development worksheet. Rep. Golden supports the preliminary recommendation regarding establishment of a single point of contact for transitioning veterans and veterans generally, which should be well publicized using targeted modern communications technology. As mentioned in Mr. Zurhorst's presentation, Rep. Golden suggested a call center similar to the 2-1-1 Maine program, which is Maine's health and human services information and referral system, for veterans to serve as a single point of contact. Director Horn pointed out that BVS is already listed in Maine's 2-1-1 system; she was not sure if adding another layer would be helpful as BVS is already linked in. However, Commission member Adrian Cole supports a 2-1-1 program specific to Maine veterans; from his perspective, a lot of veterans are getting linked to the wrong services.

Rep. Golden suggested building a marketing strategy around a simplified "hotline" for veterans. Director Horn indicated that BVS has not evaluated this proposal at this time.

IV. Presentation: Veteran Employment Program

Matt Jabaut, Human Resources Manager at TD Bank, spoke about a program called the "Veteran Employee Value Proposition" within his organization. According to Mr. Jabaut, TD Bank has renewed its focus nationwide on attracting and retaining veteran talent. The initiative is being

led by TD Bank's "U.S. diversity team" and represents a key recruitment area. The U.S. diversity team promotes job opportunities to veterans by attending recruitment events and through sponsorships.

Mr. Jabaut spoke about the values that veterans bring to civilian employers. Veterans are adaptable and self-reliant. Veterans are team players and have proven experience dedicating themselves to a cause or mission. Veterans also offer diverse perspectives across the boundaries of culture, language, ethnicity and personal motivation. TD Banks target audience for this program is active U.S. military personnel who are on leave and U.S. military veterans (those who have left the military).

Mr. Jabaut also explained the "military skills translator tool" which was created to help TD Bank recruiters and candidates to better understand how specific roles in the military, and corresponding core capabilities, translate to positions at TD Bank.

Mr. Jabaut's PowerPoint presentation is available on the Commission's webpage.

V. Work Session – Part Two

The Commission resumed its work session on potential findings and recommendations for development of their report.

Outreach and marketing (continued):

Director Horn noted that it is the goal of the Bureau to implement upgrades that benefit veterans without requiring veterans to take additional steps. These normal technology upgrades will go a long way toward marketing and outreach. A potential recommendation is to require BVS to implement a case management system and marketing and outreach program. Ms. Fox said that the Commission could describe and outline the objectives and establish benchmarks for implementation of this recommendation including reporting to the Legislature, specifically the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs (VLA). Rep. Golden agreed that it would important to the Commission and correspondingly BVS to establish benchmarks to justify the use of taxpayer dollars.

Homelessness:

See page 2 of Report Development worksheet. Commission member Randall Liberty noted that the Commission's preliminary findings and recommendations point to BVS to coordinate those action items, but the State needs to provide funding to BVS. Rep. Golden suggested a homeless coordinator position within the Bureau. Director Horn pointed out that the Bureau does not have the physical space to accommodate additional personnel. Before increasing the workload of the Bureau to include addressing homelessness, Director Horn suggested that we need to look at the structure of the Bureau so that we can make better decisions on what we can and cannot do. Ms. Fox pointed out that the Maine State Housing Authority (MSHA) is a co-applicant for funding and grants with direct community providers. However, there is no measurement of outcome. A preliminary recommendation of the Commission is to require providers to submit reports

regarding the number of veterans being served under those funded programs. “Functional zero” is when a state creates capacity (or slots) for homeless veterans. The current use of the term “functional zero” measures capacity to provide housing to those who are homeless not the outcome of placing veterans (or persons who are homeless) in housing.

Rep. Golden commented that there needs to be an agency specifically tasked with addressing homeless veterans. Commission member Alley Smith added that it is important that veterans know homelessness is a priority at the state level. The Commission asked staff to invite Peter Merrill of MSHA to its next meeting on December 17th.

Rep. Golden suggested creating an ongoing task force to address homeless veterans as it is a multi-agency issue. Director Horn mentioned that the VA has homeless coordinators so from the VA standpoint they are applying resources, but there is only so much the federal government can do; local involvement is needed. Ms. Fox summarized that the taskforce could include multiple state agencies as homelessness is an issue that requires a more concerted/coordinated effort on the part of the state. Commission member Alley Smith said a taskforce would be helpful and/or a liaison between the State of Maine and the VA.

Director Horn commented that while addressing homelessness is not a specifically stated goal of BVS, it is for many veteran advocacy organizations. She would like to include VSOs for a point-in-time survey to gauge veteran homelessness and be able to authorize overtime VSOs for participation in such a survey. Rep. Golden said that veteran homelessness is a very important issue that merits further time and consideration. The Commission should also send a letter to the Appropriations Committee outlining why homelessness should be a top priority for the state.

BVS Operations:

Director Horn spoke about issues relating to the various veterans service offices across Maine. Ms. Fox offered that the Commission’s report could include a list of current locations, pending issues and ideal locations. Rep. Golden noted that while we cannot force the VA to co-locate with Maine veteran service offices, the Commission can still note it as a finding in the report. Director Horn added that the State of Massachusetts, as part of its veterans’ outreach efforts, requires a veteran service officer (VSO) for every 12,000 veterans. If BVS were to adopt the same ratio as Massachusetts, Maine would have 12 VSOs; currently, Maine has 7 VSOs.

VA claims generally:

See page 6 of the Report Development worksheet. It is a preliminary finding of the Commission that the State of Maine provides funding (approximately 75% of salaries) for two VSOs at Togus representing national veteran service organizations. There is no formal oversight mechanism to ensure that the funding is being used in a way to achieve intended outcomes. Director Horn noted that BVS will not be able to oversee these claims. The VA is a national organization with national caseloads and the VA uses state funds with only one-quarter of those funds going toward claims of Maine veterans. Rep. Golden agreed and added that the state is providing funding to two Togus VSOs at approximately \$100,000 per year yet the state lacks the ability to oversee their work.

Commission member Adrian Cole said the larger problem is that post-level VSOs are not trained; if the state is trying to make an impact, funding should go toward technology and training. Commission member Randall Liberty commented that the state should stipulate that state funding go to Maine veterans; there need to be conditions. Senator Collins asked what the conditions are now relating to funding VSOs. Ms. Fox answered that general reports must be submitted to BVS that provide the number of cases handled as VSOs (but no data on the quality of service as pointed out by Director Horn in previous discussions).

Rep. Golden said that the VLA Committee should review how the cascade is spent. (The cascade that Rep. Golden is referring to is the Veterans Coordinated Assistance Fund revenue which passes through BVS to the non-BVS VSOs). Ms. Fox noted that these funds are spent on the Disabled American Veteran (DAV) vans and salaries for non-BVS (Togus) VSOs. According to Rep. Golden, approximately \$15,000 goes toward DAV vans, but these vans can only be used for transportation to Togus. Rep. Golden said that the VLA Committee may want to look into this issue as well. Ms. Fox summarized that the Commission is recommending that the VLA Committee review how the cascade is spent to maximize the benefit to Maine veterans.

Mental health care access:

See page 9 of the Report Development worksheet. Ms. Fox pointed out that the Commission developed more findings than recommendations under this policy area as many of the issues are under federal jurisdiction. Director Horn suggested that the VA? could provide a list of mental health care providers to veterans, but she was unsure if there would be restrictions. Rep. Golden said that this could be a best practice rather than a mandate.

Education:

See pages 10 and 11 of the Report Development worksheet. Director Horn suggested a recommendation that the Commission send a letter to Maine's Congressional Delegation that would support prohibiting the VA from collecting a debt from student veterans that resulted from VA overpayment.

Deceased veterans:

See Page 11 of the Report Development worksheet. Director Horn noted that a case management system will enable the Bureau to provide lifetime services to veterans and their survivors. Director Horn also pointed out that the veteran cemeteries are a hefty cost to the state in order to actually sustain the cemeteries. BVS wants more veterans to come to the Bureau for services yet if BVS has more veterans they will have more work to do and the Bureau will need more space. Director Horn recommended that the VLA Committee review the veteran cemetery system in Maine and its ability to meet the future needs of Maine veterans.

Honoring veterans:

See page 12 of the Report Development worksheet. Director Horn spoke briefing about a program initiated by Governor Baldacci during the 122nd Maine Legislature that honors veterans. One-time funding was provided for the program but it is really an enduring program.

Other:

Rep. Golden raised the issue of the Veterans Treatment Court, which used to be funded by federal grants, but is now funded by the state. Commission member Randall Liberty pointed out that Kennebec County has a Central Maine Veterans Court, but it is difficult for veterans from other parts of the state to uproot family and leave their jobs to enroll in the Kennebec County program. Mr. Liberty added that the majority of county jails don't ask incoming inmates if he or she has served in the military so veterans in the jail system are not identified. Mr. Liberty said that the state could encourage the county sheriffs on that issue and it doesn't require additional resources.

Commission members asked staff to schedule a presentation relating to the Veterans Treatment Court at the Commission's next meeting.

Commission members also asked for a presentation from Secretary of State Matt Dunlap regarding provisional driver licenses and what might be possible for veterans who have had their licenses suspended or revoked.

The next meeting of the Commission will be held on Thursday, December 17, 2015 beginning at 9 AM.

Commission adjourned.

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