

# UNITED VETERANS LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL OF MINNESOTA

Veterans Service Building

2<sup>nd</sup> Floor □ 20 West 12<sup>th</sup> Street □ St. Paul MN □ 55155-2079



Army

Air Force

Marine Corps

Coast Guard

Merchant Marines

Navy

“A Consortium of Veterans, Military and Auxiliary organizations to exchange information and support issues relating to entitlements for Veterans, Military Retirees, National Guard and Military Reservists, their dependents and survivors.”

UVLC Website – [www.mnuvlc.org](http://www.mnuvlc.org)

## **UVLC Minutes –Wednesday, January 5, 2011**

The meeting was called to order at 09:30 hours by Chairman, Ralph Donais. The Invocation was given by Vice Chairman, Jerry Kyser and MN National Guard Chaplain 1LT Kevin Coder. The Pledge of Allegiance was led by First Commander Fay Hassey.

Chairman Ralph Donais asked that all visitors and guests introduce themselves. In attendance was Peter J. Nickitas, Department Commander Jewish War Veterans.

Announcements: Chairman Donais invited the group to attend a meeting of the Military Action Group being held on Thursday, January 6, 2011 at 10:30 in Room 300S at the State Capital. This organization promotes veteran’s affairs at the state level. Committee meetings will be ramping up soon and we “need hats in attendance” to show our interest and involvement.

## **State Agencies and MN Veteran Assistance Organizations**

**MN Dept of Veteran Affairs** ~ Gil Acevedo, Deputy Commissioner for Veteran's Healthcare and Acting Commissioner of the Department of Veterans Affairs ~ Mr. Acevedo informed the group of new hires to their staff; Mike McElhiney, Director of Legislation for State of Affairs, Minneapolis Veteran's Home Administrator Shelly Kendrick and Interim Administrator at the Hastings Veteran's Home Robin Godstad. A lengthy discussion was held on the changes made at the Hastings Veteran's home due to allegations of an environment of fear of the staff by the residents. The VA Survey team currently conducting their annual survey is very complimentary of the leadership changes, staff and the processes implemented. The Minneapolis Veteran's Home has an outbreak of the Norwalk virus so limiting visitors to the home to control the illness from spreading outside of the home.

**MN Veterans 2010 Legislative Information** ~ Mike McElhiney, Director of Legislation for State of Affairs presented an overview of his background prior to joining the MN Department of Veteran Affairs to our membership. Mr. McElhiney expressed a sincere desire to work with our organization on legislative issues and concerns within the MN Department of Veteran Affairs.

**MN Military Affairs** ~ COL Eric Ahlness ~ The State of MN currently has 287 soldiers deployed within the National Guard. The State of MN will be deploying 2,800 – 2,900 soldiers and airman from the MN National Guard in 2011.

Annette Kuyper ~ (Director of Military Outreach for Military Affairs) ~ discussed the results of the Yellow Ribbon Campaign. The goal of the Yellow Ribbon Campaign is to provide resources infusing support into communities for all of our service personnel and their families. Annette defined the Yellow Ribbon Network that is being promoted in cities with National Guard Armories. They have engaged all but 16 of 63 communities with National Guard Armories as part of the yellow ribbon community network. Areas of need include; financial planning; literacy and budgeting before, during and after a deployment, ensuring that school administrators are aware of students with a deployed parent and providing the availability of secondary education for active military when they return or during a deployment. The Yellow Ribbon Network is partnering with TriCare to ensure military personal have access to health care both mental health and internal medicine. A primary goal is to encourage employment opportunities and to form partnerships with corporations in our communities to ensure community acceptance and involvement before, during and after a deployment of an employee. With a network such as the Yellow Ribbon Campaign families are more likely to weather a deployment. Website: [beyondtheyellowribbon.org](http://beyondtheyellowribbon.org)

**MN Assistance Council for Veterans (MACV)** ~ Kathy Vitalis ~ Dates for the 2011 Metro & Rochester Stand-Downs will be given to the membership at our February meeting. MACV will be applying for a supportive services grant (SSVF). The SSVF grant will enable MACV to work towards achieving an agency goal of eliminating homelessness among veterans. There are 50 agencies competing for 50 grants so MACV's desire is to coordinate efforts with other outreach agencies. This is a renewable grant if you meet your outcomes. MACV would welcome all letters of support in their quest to obtain one of these grants. Kathy will furnish a wish list for the Ramsey Structured Independent Living ~ New Transitional Housing in Maplewood. Immediate need is for twin bed frames and dressers.

**Military Action Group (MAG)** ~ Jerry Kyser ~ MAG works to develop bi-partisan goals for legislative assemblies in regards to veteran's affairs. The goal of MAG is to maintain the current programs when the budget deficit is at an all time high. One goal is to make veterans liaisons at all colleges aware of available funding that was recently provided by the GI Bill for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Jerry intends to meet with leaders of the House, Senate and various committee leaders setting the tone for the 2011 in reference to the needs of veterans. MAG works in conjunction with the Commanders Task Force. Goal of MAG... to make Minnesota Veteran friendly!

COL Eric Alness mentioned if you have been receiving announcements via email for committee meetings you need to reenroll based on the new legislation.

The Senate Veteran's Committee meets Monday & Wednesday's and the House doesn't have dates published as of yet.

### **Federal Agencies**

**VA Regional Office** ~ Antione Waller, Director ~ Mr. Waller joined the VA Regional Office on November 1, 2010. Highlights from the quarter; The Pension Management Center processed over 11,000 compensation and pension claims. As a courtesy they have also processed 2,000 claims for other regional offices. Quality at the VA Pension Management Center continues to be one of the highest (top ten) in the nation. The primary objective is to make sure veterans are getting every benefit they are entitled to. The interagency goal is to continue to strive to achieve the highest levels of customer service.

The new outreach program has enabled a representative from the regional office to participate in 13 outreach events. The VA Regional Office has 9,000 guaranteed new home loans available for our area; they placed 35 veterans in the work force and an additional 1,200 veterans in various programs.

Changes in the Agent Orange preemptive continue. As a nation we are looking hard at claims previously filed and denied. To date about 19,000 claims have been evaluated and the agency has paid out \$330M. On an average the payout is \$17,000 per retroactive claim.

Fast Track enables veterans to submit claims online receiving faster service at a higher degree of quality.

The Whipple Federal Building is undergoing renovations prior to the VA Regional Office relocating to the Whipple Building on June 1, 2011.

E-benefits ~ an online resource that the VA Regional Office is offering in collaboration with the DOD. This is a tool that allows a veteran to assess his information, track the status of his / her claims, view payment history, obtain applications for home loan certificates and provides veterans with the ability to review the benefits they have received. [www.ebenefits.va.gov](http://www.ebenefits.va.gov).

Beginning March, 2013 the VA will stop issuing paper checks and those not on any form of direct deposit will receive a prepaid debit card.

An agency goal is to increase our ability to reach out and support our homeless. If you know of a veteran that has needs please share with them this phone number: 1 877-424-3838 ~ counselors are available around the clock to address issues affecting the homeless.

Secretary Shinseki's vision is to be closer to our veterans. The regional office strives daily to work and live that vision. Mr. Waller's mission is to operate in a results driven environment that is veteran centric developing plans and programs to improve the future of our veterans. Mr. Waller stated he has a commitment and passion to serve the veterans of MN.

Ralph Donais brought up a concern that individuals are no longer able to deliver used clothing directly to a veteran. You are required to put all of the clothes in a bin that is then sold off by the pound. The VA then gets the money back to purchase new clothing.

**VISN 23** ~ Janet Murphy ~ Network Director VISN 23 ~ their budget is in very good shape for fiscal year 2011. They will be able to meet all obligations and fund any new workloads for veterans coming in. They are struggling with collections involving third party insurance as many veterans with third party insurance have lost jobs or have employers that are reducing or discontinuing healthcare coverage. VISN 23 is the fastest growing network in terms of new work loads in the country specifically the Minneapolis and St Cloud locations. Janet will speak at our February meeting about the care giver support act

which will pay family members who provide healthcare to particular types of wounded veterans beginning March 2011.

Vicki Edmunds ~ it is your decision if you want to be seen as a TriCare beneficiary or as a veteran. In the world of health care delivery with TriCare you are seen under your DOD benefits. You will be issued TriCare co-pay but no VA co-pay! It is rarely a benefit for veterans to be seen under TriCare at a VA Medical Center.

In terms of reservists in the National Guard: there are specific state rules requiring the care of wounded National Guard veterans. As far as the VA's ability to take care of wounded veterans if they are still active duty military a referral from the DOD is necessary. After that referral is received the VA is required to care for wounded veterans. It really is a case by case basis based on number of day's activated and current status.

**VA Employee Education System** ~ Susan Hotzler, Project Manager ~ their department provides training and educational programs for staff in VA facilities across the United States. In August, 2010 a national training program was held for 1,400 health care providers. As part of the training conference a silent auction was held to sponsor The Twin Cities and Iowa Quad – Cities Honor Flights. Both organizations were presented a check for \$6,527.00. Jerry Kyser told the group that the next honor flight for our chapter will be held October 8, 2011!

**Mpls VA Medical Center** ~ Steve Kleinglass, Director

Jerry Nalipinski presented a check for \$19,540.95 to Steve Kleinglass for the VA Medical Center's emergence fund to be used specifically for the social work department to provide items that the VA can't legally provide for veterans. This is the last check as this account has been depleted and closed.

**Steve Kleinglass ~ Director** ~ Discussed the importance of establishing a relationship with our association as Steve thanked the group for their support. The VA Medical Center is currently finishing several construction projects that were possible due to stimulus money. Elevators, a \$3M project considered non reoccurring maintenance and repair, as well as the installation of new carpeting and flooring in various areas throughout the medical center are works in progress. The canteen cafeteria is being updated with new furniture and new serving line areas. Other upcoming construction projects: Steve recently met with architectural firm designing the inpatient ward of the future. The parking garage a minor construction project is under design with proposed funding available October 1, 2011. Requirements are that it be user friendly as the customers will be elderly individuals that need lots of space. This is a minor construction project managed out of a pool at VA Headquarters.

The second Fischer House is totally incredible and will be dedicated within the next few months.

The VA Medical Center grew 6.5% in the first few months of the new fiscal year. They completed 3,500 compensation and pension exams in December finishing up the month of December based on a workload of 31 days; one day over the expected workload. The plan for January is to be under 30 days. The new clinic in the NW Metro is under construction due to be open in the summer of 2011.

Secretary Shinseki has made homelessness a major initiative. Steve and his leadership group will be out the end of January conducting a count of homeless in the metro area to show their commitment.

Chief of Staff Dr. Jack Drucker retired and a search is underway with plans to hire a replacement by summer 2011.

In November, 2010 the President announced there would be a two year pay freeze for federal employees. It did not include DOD active duty military only the civilian sector. The VA Medical Center has multiple pay systems in place but for the general rank and file employees there is a two year pay freeze in place. This particular pay freeze doesn't include promotions or within rate increases. Questions on how this will impact their pay system still remain to be answered.

The VA Medical Center pharmacy is processing 6,000 outpatient prescriptions daily. About 4,000 are through the mail out system which offers 24/7 availability. The pharmacy at its inception was processing 1,800 prescriptions a day with a \$10M budget now the budget is approximately \$53M. Steve was asked if the medical center pharmacy could provide a drop off location similar to other pharmacies via a tamper proof container to dispose of unused medicines so they aren't being put in our groundwater.

Jerry Kyser discussed removing the dirt pile in the parking lot to increase the number of parking spaces. Steve mentioned the amazing job the grounds crew has been doing this winter with record amounts of snow. Only one fall has occurred that resulted in injury this season.

**St Cloud VA Medical Center** ~ Barb Oemcke ~ Business Office Manager  
~ The St Cloud VA Medical Center recently underwent a name change. They will now be referred to as the "St Cloud VA Health Care System." On behalf of the Director she would like reiterate they appreciate and value the working relationships and partnerships they have with various veterans service organizations as they work together to serve veterans needs. Patient growth is at a 6% increase for the first few months of this fiscal year. The facility is

working toward serving more veterans in the upcoming year. If you know of an organization that would like a speaker to present a program on OIF / OEF they have staff available.

**New Brighton Vets Center** ~ Carl Sporer ~ not in attendance

**Fort Snelling Cemetery** ~ Artis Parker ~ Assistant Director ~ The mission of Fort Snelling is to honor our veterans with a dignified burial and maintain our national cemetery as a shrine.

December 2010

Total Interments: 357

Caskets: 204 (57%)

Cremations: 21 (6%)

Columbarium: 32

In the winter months cremations typically decrease. During the month of December the cremation rate was 6%; which will rise to 57 – 60% (10% columbarium) in the spring.

Mr. Parker would like to thank the countless organizations that help to support and honor our nation's veterans. Fort Snelling's Memorial Rifle Squad does a tremendous job helping Fort Snelling perform honors to our veterans. During the month of December the Fort Snelling Memorial Rifle Squad performed honors for 151 veterans. (83 US Army, 35 Navy, 1 Coast Guard, 1 Merchant Marine, 8 Marine Core, 23 Air Force Veterans.) YTD interment rate is 1,137 (Oct 1 – December 31, 2010).

On Dec 11, 2010 even with a record snow fall 65 brave and committed souls came and assisted the staff with the placement of wreaths on each grave site. Boys Scouts will remove the wreaths the second week of February. No current cemetery projects. Nine cemetery director interns will be training for a week to observe winter burial operations.

**Vets Employment & Training Service [VETS]** – Jodie Bean ~ VETS provides “Resources and Expertise to Assist and Prepare Veterans to Obtain Meaningful Careers, Maximize their Employment Opportunities, and Protect their Employment Rights under the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act of 1994 (USERRA).”

VETS investigates USERRA claims for any employers but specifically looking at federal employers. VETS is now participating in a three year pilot program Congress has decided is necessary as another federal agency is advocating they can do the job better. As part of the study they will be measuring efficiency, the outcome of the investigation, response time for completion and knowledge of the investigator. After the pilot program is complete Congress will determine which agency will handle the claims.

Regarding FMLA coverage and lack of coverage for military spouses when it comes to anti- harassment protection. Right now their agency isn't focusing on military spouses to expand a lot of coverage to as they are focused on the veterans themselves and what they can do for them. FMLA allows for the time off but doesn't necessarily provide the same anti harassment and anti discrimination protection.

Maine has a state law that provides anti harassment protection for military spouses when they request time off due to a service members commitment to the military. MN doesn't currently have a law in place like this.

**Veterans in the Arts** ~ Suzanne Asher ~ Veterans in the Arts is an organization that is facilitating the ability of veterans to express themselves in a variety of art / media forms through a progressive program of supportive instruction. They are developing a safe place for veterans to work in the arts if they so chose. They are support by Metropolitan Regional Arts Council which gets money from state legislature. Veterans in the Arts believe that veterans should enjoy the full rights and privileges of citizenship. This includes the right to creatively developed oneself. MN leads the nation in community based art programs and organizations. The recently passed legacy amendment ensures a certain percentage of our sales tax goes to arts and cultural heritage. Veterans are not proportionally represented in the arts. Veterans can be anxious about crossing the bridge into the art community and being able to go back again. Veterans in the Arts wants to be the link between the two communities; veterans and the arts. The art centers they are working with are delighted to reach out to veterans as previously they didn't know how to approach them. The solution is veterans only courses based on introductory classes and workshops to get them acquainted with the concept of arts. The next step is advanced classes in a particular art form.

### Introductory Classes

If you are curious about making art, about learning different ways to remember and feel about things, about what other veterans have made on the subject of war, about being with other like-minded people, supporting each other and being inspired by gifted teachers, then try this class. It will meet for eight weeks at the St Paul Veterans Resource Center and will include fieldtrip/workshop meetings at four different Arts Centers. Materials fee \$50. (Tuition is supported by our sponsors.)



## Advanced Classes

If you've taken our Introductory Class and discovered that a particular art form really intrigues you, then take this twelve week class and learn the foundations of the art form alongside other veterans. Our gifted teachers will work with you as you explore your creativity and acquire new skills of understanding and communication. No judgments or grades as this an expression of the students experiences.

Spread the word about the program as it is currently in the twin cities and if the model proves successful they will look to expand.

[www.veteransinthearts.org](http://www.veteransinthearts.org)

## **Federal Congressional Senators and Representatives**

**Senator Amy Klobuchar** – Martin Ludden ~ not in attendance

**Senator Al Franken** ~ Nate Arch ~ The Senator is interested in learning what veteran's groups throughout the state would like to accomplish going forward. Senator Franken's office will have seven academy nominations. Nate will discuss at our February meeting how prior academy nominees are progressing. He will approach prior nominees to see if an individual would be interested in speaking to the group.

**7<sup>th</sup> District Representative** ~ Collin Peterson- Al Loehr ~ Mr. Loehr is not particularly optimistic about new programs being added this year but if we can hold on to what we have at the present time we will be lucky as the budget deficit is quite bad. He will be much better informed at our next meeting as he will know exactly which folks we need to partner with based on committee assignments. Whatever Representative Peterson can do to assist veterans please contact him.

The group discussed the appointment of a Commissioner of Veterans Affairs and the process that the selection committee will engage. First step in the process includes screening the applicants. Once that has been completed the finalists will be submitted to all the major veterans' organizations for their opinion. The committee will make a recommendation to the governor as the governor will be responsible for authorizing and approving the final decision. Ralph Donais mentioned that MAG gave the transition committee suggestions on what the new commissioner should have as far as qualities and qualifications to be an effective commissioner.

**1st District Representative** ~ Tim Walz ~ Shawn Schloesser ~ Veteran's Field Representative for Congressman Tim Walz. Congressman Walz has been appointed as co-chair to the bi-partisan commission for the National Guard and Reserve Caucus. He is looking forward to his increased responsibility in supporting the members of the Guard and Reserve. Shawn is pleased to announce that there will be a CBOC in Mankato with a presence in St James. Sterling Medical has been awarded the contract as they have many CBOC's though the country so are very well versed in what they do. The 1<sup>st</sup> District is looking forward to a grand opening in April, 2011. FYI~ First time home buyer credit has expired unless you served overseas through the DOD or Foreign Service from Dec, 31, 2008 - May 1, 2010. If that applies to you the credit is extended until April, 2011. You only need 90 days outside the USA to qualify. More detailed information available on the IRS website. Look up first time homebuyer tax credit for clarification. First time home buyer means you haven't owned a home in three years.

**2<sup>nd</sup> District Representative ~ John Kline** ~ Chaz Johnson ~ The Congressman was supportive of the new GI bill which will improve educational benefits and allow service members to utilize vocational institutions in the area. Congressman Kline will be the Chairman for the Education and Labor Committee and will also be sitting on the House and Armed Services Committee. They conducted 34 interviews for service academy nominations and will recommend about 26 for appointment. The group discussed at length the Lockheed Martin decision to vacate their location in Eagan. The Congressman and the Governor contacted the President of Lockheed. It appears the overriding factor was that the F22 is no longer being built which was their focal point as it was the major component of the Eagan facility. Senator Ted Daley offered to assist "but all has been done that can be done" as the decision to vacate the premises was made before anyone was even aware of a change in the status of Lockheed Martin. Outreach has been offered to the employees to let them know where they can get transitional help by providing a list of resources and links.

**3<sup>rd</sup> District Representative ~ Erik Paulsen** ~ not in attendance

**4<sup>th</sup> District Representative ~ Betty McCollum** ~ Connie Haddeland ~ Connie provided information on the Post 9/11 Veterans Education Bill Enhancement Act which passed the House December 16, 2010 and is now waiting the signature of the President. Congresswoman McCollum asked that Connie make available the handout regarding the Wounded Warrior and Disabled Veterans piece of the bill. MN was adversely impacted this year due to a state education cap system. Veterans in MN according to pre 9/11 received a smaller tuition amount based on the loss of a program at the U of M that set the high standards for the reimbursement amount. Many veterans saw a decrease of 40% in their tuition reimbursement. This act removes this state cap making the amount universal across the country instead of a state agency

certifying that amount. This bill also allows for an extension of benefits to people who have served under different titles vs. just Title 10. This was the culmination of the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress on behalf of their continued expansion to support and address the needs of our Veterans.

Don Rask has asked several times about the Defense Authorization Act of 2011. This act contains the extension of TriCare dependant coverage which allows families to cover students till age 26. TriCare was not included in the prior healthcare reform act which allowed families to cover students. TriCare wasn't specifically not included it was part of the piece where the TriCare system and the Veterans system wasn't specifically addressed under the health care reform act.

The Congresswoman conducted 26 academy interviews and is going to nominate eight individual to four academies including two principal nominations to the Merchant Marines.

**5<sup>th</sup> District Representative ~ Keith Ellison** ~ Mike Siebenaler ~ not in attendance

**6<sup>th</sup> District Representative- Michele Bachmann** ~ Nicole Severson ~ Chas Kroll is now the DC Staff Contact for Veterans and Military Affairs. Chas is very aware of this group and is extremely knowledgeable about bringing forth veteran's issues. Fantastic turnout for academy nominations and their office is very excited to put forth their names. They are holding up on their naval recommendations because they are hoping to work with Klobacher and Franken's offices to obtain the names of a few more students. The Congresswoman's office will be contacting school counselors to discuss the opportunities and benefits of the service academies.

**8<sup>th</sup> District Representative- Chip Cravaack** ~ Callie Wahl ~ Callie previously worked on veterans issues on behalf of Congresswoman Michelle Bachman's office and will continue working on those issues in the 8<sup>th</sup> District. Next month she will have more information on the legislative assistance available in DC and what they can offer from their office.

**Announcements** ~ On the registration table there is a black three ring binder that has information regarding the Little Falls Cemetery Art Project that the UVLC hopes to complete in the next year. The Armed Forces Service Center is always looking for volunteers and support. Ralph Donais challenged members to write a letter to the editor of their community newspaper encouraging veterans to join veteran's organizations in their community as they are the most effective resource in determining the needs of veterans.

Ralph is working on updating the chapter telephone directory. He is currently verifying phone numbers and email addresses. It is important to embrace the

latest technology. Email availability will provide a quick turnaround of information if there is breaking news between meetings.

### **Meeting in Recess for 5 minutes**

#### **General Business**

ULVC Treasurer's Report 1 January, 2011. Our account has a balance of \$3,801.63. Submitted by Donald Rask, Treasurer. Bills for dues will be sent out this month. Correction: the \$150,000 from the State Chapter of PVA was for the installation of a gazebo and computer upgrades in patients room at the Minneapolis campus of the VA Medical Center.

**Certification of the Election of 2011 Officers** ~ A motion made by Ralph Donais to elect Jerry Kyser for First Vice and Dean Ascheman for Secretary was passed on a motion by Commander Bob Erickson.

Jerry Kyser mentioned that he stopped at the governor's office to make contact with the public affairs office. UVLC needs to maintain contact with a member of the legislative interaction staff to ensure we are aware of what is going on at the state level.

Jerry discussed the appointment of the Commissioner of the Department of Veterans Affairs and the desire of the governor's office to hire a person that will continue the building of relationships and interactions with the various veterans' organizations throughout the state. The new governor wants to support veteran's organizations as previous administrations have done.

UVLC needs to make our presence known to the new appointees and leaders in the House and Senate. It is imperative to inform them of MAG a bi-partisan organization. Ralph Donais discussed MAG developing a structured plan to interact and contact the new representation. There has been interest in designing a pamphlet on spouse protection that would detail what a spouse needs to do before the activation of a military person in the family.

#### **New Business - Legislative Issues**

When will Veterans Day on the Hill be scheduled? Ralph Donais discussed the need for a constant presence "on the hill" from veterans just not on a specific day. As soon as the new commissioner is appointed we will make an effort to have a date set. Veterans Day on the Hill provides us with an opportunity to get in front of all the new representation so they can see the number of "hats" involved in promoting veterans issues.

Motion to adjourn was made by Fay Hassey.

**Next Meeting 9:30 AM - Wed, February 2, 2011**

**VISN 23 Building 9 Auditorium**

**Mpls Medical Center Campus Minneapolis MN**