

# Virginia Department of Veteran Services Town Hall Meetings

## Abingdon Summary

The Virginia Department of Veterans Services (DVS) conducted town hall meetings in response to Governor Kaine's Executive Order 19. This executive order directs DVS and other state agencies to improve services to the state's veterans, especially disabled veterans.

DVS identified four primary areas of focus:

1. Outreach and communication with Virginia's veterans: How can we reach veterans and what information do they need and want?
2. Quality of life for all veterans: What are the needs of veterans, especially in terms of health care, services from state government agencies, and outreach to veterans who are homeless, incarcerated, or hospitalized?
3. Workforce development: How can we ensure that employment opportunities are available to veterans and how can we ensure that the private sector has access to the veteran labor pool. What can we do to assist veteran-owned businesses?
4. Technology: How can we use technology to communicate with and deliver services to veterans?

This report summarizes the comments provided by participants attending the session held at the Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center on March 7, 2007 in Abingdon, Virginia. Approximately 35 people attended the meeting including representatives from state agencies, veterans' service organizations, retired and active servicemen and women and spouses of veterans.

The session gathered information concerning:

1. What currently works well in delivering state government services to veterans and what are the best practices in place?
2. What are the critical barriers to serving veterans and what are the most important issues facing veterans?
3. Recommendations for future action to improve state government services to veterans.

The meeting was facilitated by faculty from Virginia Commonwealth University's Office of Public Policy Training.

### **What is Currently Working Well to meet Veteran's Needs**

- Improved communication with veterans
  - More workers in field
  - More contact with local service officers
  - Information on who to contact
- Supermarket expos reach a lot of people
- Website links with cross references to other resources
- Combining agencies in a central location and maintaining a regular schedule
- Letter and telephone contact
- Mountain Home – top notch staff – try to combine appointments to reduce travel
- Outpatient clinics – closer to veterans – good treatment
- Veterans Administration (VA) clinics in Washington County
- E-mails from DVS
- Newsletter coverage of meetings and events

### **Critical Barriers to be Addressed**

- Tazewell and Buchanan County veterans have to Beckley, West Virginia for VA services
- Not enough outpatient clinics
- Long travel time to Roanoke; Johnson City for VA services
- Difficult to reach younger veterans
- Disabled and sought VA assistance in reference to medication but was deemed not eligible due to current level of assets – eligibility should be based on military service
- Some claims not properly worked; lack of training
- Johnson City Medical Center cannot take on returning veterans due to a lack of doctors
- It can take up to 3-5 years of training for a new claims representative – what happens to veteran in the meantime?
- Veterans are falling through the cracks and experiencing long waiting periods on benefit decisions – no system of accountability
- Not all organizations are making use of National Guard and Reserves to reach veterans
- Closest VA center is too far away – no transportation, no professional support groups – need more counseling support
- Spouses and family members need services too – not enough information and services – need outpatient clinic for family needs
- See regular VA doctor but when applying for increase in disability must see a new doctor – long wait for a very short exam which then takes a long time to process
- Long waiting period to get VA response to claim
- VA lost paperwork – complicated, lengthy process for benefits; no medical records; did not know benefits were available in reference to medication
- As more people use DVS, the agency will need more claim representatives – constant learning phase
- Some localities give tax breaks to veterans but standards are very difficult to meet (income limits, etc.)

## **Recommendations for Action**

- Make benefits and assistance information available at the armory
- Advertise assistance is available to help file hardship claims
- Provide additional appropriations for VA facilities and personnel
- DVS should talk with other states to see what benefits they offer such as free driver licenses, etc. (Massachusetts is a model)
- Review rejected claims to document reasons for rejection to help resolve problems and provide targeted training
- Reduce time lag from claim submission to VA decision
- Create a Governor's recognition program for companies that hire veterans – Build on Guard and Reserve programs to protect jobs
- Provide spousal benefits for education and career assistance to improve employability of disabled veterans' spouses
- Organizations conducting veteran surveys should find ways to assure veterans it is legitimate and their information is secure
- DVS should try to get state tax breaks for veterans
- Provide periodic newsletter (letter or website) to all Virginia veterans to share information
- Establish additional medical clinics in Coalfields region
- Make sure VA doctors are doing their job – they should play golf on their time
- Provide dental benefits for any level of disability – eliminate separate criteria for dental assistance
- Provide more assistance to younger veterans in finding jobs – provide training to build skills for new jobs
- Drop benefit wait time for spouses when the veteran is disabled – 10 year wait is too long
- Provide more assistance to employers in applying for disabled veteran tax credits
- Find ways to help veterans when the VA cannot find records; issue statements of services
- Use more electronic records to eliminate loss of records by VA
- Create Virginia database of state veterans
- Conduct more town hall meetings around the state with veterans
- Establish 1-800 numbers for state and federal veteran assistance organizations
- Provide copies of medical records and benefits upon discharge – medical logs destroyed after 10 years
- Find ways to cut VA red tape and delays
- Primary care doctor should do C and P rating
- Hire more DVS service officers in the regional office to appeal cases
- Workforce Investment Act adult worker program should set aside state funds to be dedicated to veterans to boost employment without income qualification- on-the-job training salary coverage
- Provide a quicker response to veterans when trying to access records – some cases require multiple filings to get response or records – benefit of the doubt should go to veteran – create review panel of veterans