

Virginia Department of Veteran Services Town Hall Meetings

Richmond 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 Virginia War Memorial on March 15, 2007 in Richmond, Virginia. Approximately 33 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

1. Job fairs for veterans help them get information about and make contact with employers
2. Joint Leadership Council (JLC) in Virginia
3. State approved education benefits
4. DVS staff helps veterans make connection with Veterans Administration (VA)
5. National Guard and Reserves are helping young veterans find assistance
6. VA medical services are currently under national review
7. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) classes are offered at the VA McGuire Medical Center – more publicity needed
8. DVS staff helped move the VA to action and provided improved access to the VA system
9. Executive Order 19 indicates Virginia's veterans are a priority
10. State agencies, such as the Department of Rehabilitative Services and DVS, have programs for disabled veterans to provide technical training
11. DVeterans employment programs
12. Guard and Reserve are helping young veterans transition back to civilian life

Critical Barriers to be Addressed

1. It is difficult to get information and services for the children of veterans when the veteran is disabled, especially help in finding them employment
2. Differing interpretations of law and policy related to the G.I. Bill , some students are being penalized upon receiving G.I. benefits since institutions treat the assistance as income and reduce their financial aid offers
3. TRicare and CHAMPUS penalizes you for longevity – if still employed when you are 65 or older you must register with social security for health care coverage
4. Veterans denied a grave marker if no next of kin is available to fill out a request
5. Vietnam veterans have not received as much support from veteran organizations as veterans from other conflicts
6. Information that the VA has is not shared with the veteran – denied access to records
7. VA benefits to the widow of a veteran were denied due to income limits – difficult to get clear answers – the veteran was disabled and thought benefits would be paid upon his death
8. WWII veterans don't always know they can increase disability coverage as their health deteriorates over time
9. Veterans affairs cannot represent the veteran in federal court creating a large financial burden for the veteran to hire a lawyer to appeal their claim
10. It took seven years to get an appeal of a rejected claim to federal court
11. VMSDEP for family needs clarification as to who can benefit – all veteran children?
12. Recent returning veterans have two-year window to file a health care claim – problems surface later than that time period
13. Federal, state and local government organizations protect their information and turf, making it difficult for children to help parents who are veterans – privacy issues block action – state should be advocates for the veterans

14. Many returning veterans have injuries and it is not clear if we have the resources to care for them
15. Have to pay for medication in Virginia but not Kentucky – inconsistent policies
16. No state transition assistance program to share information on state benefits for veterans relocating into Virginia
17. Inability to get the word to all veterans about health care benefits and where to go for help
18. Veterans who are 60% disabled are not considered eligible for homeless benefits by the VA

Recommendations for Action

1. Have Social Security Administration staff automatically link veterans to DVS when applying for benefits
2. Provide transferability of education entitlement to spouse and dependents for members of the National Guard and Reserves
3. Provide legal assistance to veterans trying to resolve claims and pay attorneys on contingency if they win the case
4. Focus on young returning veterans to help ensure they get the information and assistance they need
5. Transfer military experience and training into credentials (for example, driving large military vehicles should count towards getting a commercial driver license)
6. Get information to veterans about burial benefits
7. State assistance should be provided to help obtain federal grants for upward bound programs – provide matching funds
8. Nongovernmental organizations should provide information and assistance to veterans to supplement state and federal resources (ex: DAV; Catholic Charities; Red Cross)
9. Virginia should create a Federal Women's Coordinator for veterans' services
10. Children should be able to tap into benefits when the veteran returns and is unable to care for child – the child should not need parental approval to access benefits
11. Provide access to all records upon request of the veteran
12. Find ways to pass on knowledge to new DVS staff to meet the needs of a growing number of veterans – boost training programs
13. The military should help assure that veterans have certifiable skills upon discharge to improve employability
14. Provide bonding to veterans who have felony convictions to help them gain employment
15. Provide services for violent and sex offenders to help them get jobs
16. Provide information at local health departments on how to get social services benefits to prevent veterans from being homeless
17. Provide legal assistance to veterans challenging VA decisions – request assistance from the Virginia Bar Association
18. Improve the ability to tap into expertise and services in communities – network resources

19. Reduce the amount of paperwork young veterans have to complete when applying for benefits by creating a database of service records
20. Offer a short-term loan program for returning members of the National Guard and Reserve to help them get back on their feet financially
21. Apply state pressure to the VA to reduce the claim processing time
22. Veteran service organization who receive government financial support should not charge membership fees to veterans
23. Provide a one-time tax break for veterans upon their return to ease their financial transition
24. Remove 15 minute restriction that a VA doctor is asked to follow when seeing patients
25. Ensure that a former Virginia resident is immediately reinstated residency upon their discharge when they have resided in other states due to their military assignments (ex: paying instate tuition)