

DRAFT MINUTES

**Senate Committee on State Agencies and Governmental Affairs
House Committee on Aging, Children and Youth, Legislative and Military
Affairs
Meeting Jointly**

**Monday, October 28, 2019
1:00 PM
311. S. West Avenue
El Dorado, Arkansas**

Committee Members Present: Senators Trent Garner, Vice Chair; Jimmy Hickey, Jr.

House Aging Children & Youth Members Present: Representatives Sonia Eubanks Barker, Vice-Chair; LeAnne Burch, Craig Christiansen, Tippi McCullough, Jay Richardson and Danny Watson.

Other Legislators Present: Senators Eddie Cheatham, Linda Chesterfield and Kim Hammer. Representatives Carol Dalby, Jim Dotson, David Fielding, Justin Gonzales, Jack Ladyman, Aaron Pilkington, Johnny Rye and Matthew J. Shepherd.

Senator Garner called the meeting to order. He recognized Representative Shepherd to acknowledge a moment of silence in the loss of Representative Walker.

Welcoming Remarks and Presentation of Veteran's Services Offered at South Arkansas Community College

Dr. Barbara Jones, President, South Arkansas Community College was recognized, she provided a brief introduction on what the college offers:

- Technical Training
- Associate Degree
- Corporate Training
- Targets the needs of the workforce in the area

She stated on-site veteran's services are being offered to 27 students. The campus also offers monthly lunches to veterans to provide a place to socialize and to meet with other veterans.

Congressional Delegation

Patricia Herring, Deputy State Director, Casework Manager, Office of Senator Tom Cotton, briefly spoke on services offered to veterans and how to receive help concerning veteran benefits. Mrs. Herring provided a step-by-step process on assisting veterans with VA benefits.

Colonel (Ret.) Anita Deason, Military Affairs Liaison, Office of Senator John Boozman, was recognized, she shared additional information on providing assistance for getting VA benefits, and that they can assist with getting military records, service medals, and recognizing medal ceremonies. Colonel Deason stated for the Veterans History Project veterans can be

interviewed by anyone 15 years or older and have the interview preserved in the Library of Congress.

Melinda Boyer, Field and Constituent Services Representative, Office of Representative Bruce Westerman, and David Witte, Military and Veterans Affairs Staffer, Office of Representative Bruce Westerman, briefly described services offered through Representative Bruce Westerman's office. Mr. Witte stated they are there to help veterans. They also offer assistance with Military Academy nominations for high school seniors. They are looking for students who scored a 26 or higher on the ACT. Application are due November 1st.

Suicide Prevention [EXHIBIT E]

Mandy Thomas, Injury and Violence, Section Chief, Arkansas Department of Health, was recognized to present a PowerPoint on Suicide Prevention Program. Ms. Thomas stated in 2018 there were 546 suicide deaths in Arkansas with 88 of those being veterans. Suicides per region in Arkansas for 2018 were as follows: Northwest 192; Northeast 112; Central 164; Southwest 45 and Southeast 33.

Act 811 of 2017 mandated the Department of Health to create and maintain a suicide prevention hotline. In December, 2017 the hotline began receiving calls and the average call time is ten minutes per call. Before opening the Arkansas hotline center the calls were being answered in Memphis, Oklahoma, and Texas. Arkansas is the first state in the nation to have a full-time suicide prevention hotline. Between January 2019 – September 2019, the hotline received 13,331 calls and 830 went unanswered, but rolled over to a different call center.

Veterans Service Officers [EXHIBIT F1]

Ms. Gina Chandler, Assistant Director, Arkansas Department of Veterans Affairs, was recognized and stated they are responsible for training the District Veterans Services Officer's (DVSO) and offer three-day quarterly training for County Veteran Services Officers (CVSO). They also offer dedicated phone support for the CVSO's and are able to access veterans' record by utilizing the Federal VA system. Ms. Chandler stated that the veteran population for FY 2019 is 219,000. With District 1 being the largest, it includes Pulaski, Lonoke, Jefferson, Grant and Saline counties. District 9 in south Arkansas is the largest area but has the lowest number of veterans. She mentioned some counties struggle to find CVSO's because the position is part-time and standards are high.

Danny Brown, Veterans Service Officer, Union County, and Gregg Harrell, Veterans Service Officer, Columbia County, were recognized to give a brief introduction to services offered in their areas.

Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System [EXHIBIT G]

Ms. Angie Waliski, Ph.D, LPC, NCC, Research Health Scientist, Central Arkansas Veterans Health System, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychiatry, College of Medicine, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, was recognized, she stated suicide is a global phenomenon and was the 18th leading cause of death world-wide in 2016. Also, declared by the CDC suicide is a national public health problem with 45,000 deaths per year which is almost 30 percent increase since 1999. Those at risk are the veteran populations including

younger veterans, women veterans, veterans in a period of transition, veterans with exposure to suicide, and veterans with “other than honorable” discharges. She recommended the state needs to implement strategic directions such as promoting resources for Veterans, promoting health awareness and treatment, focus on clinical and community preventive services, and research and evaluation.

Arkansas Small Business and Technology Development (ASBTDC)

Ms. Janell Morton, Center Director, ASBTDC at SAU, was recognized, she stated her office serves statewide and nationwide networks covering nine counties across southern Arkansas. The ASBTDC is funded in part by the Small Business Administration and through a partnership with the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. All programs are extended to the public on a nondiscriminatory basis and the veterans group are one of ASBTDC special groups.

Public Testimony

Senator Garner recognized Ms. Reagan Nix, she shared a recent life changing event that involved her father, a veteran who committed suicide in September. She stated that they reached out to the Veterans Association and with no answers, but to change his medication, which increasingly resulted in mood swings.

Representative Christiansen provided testimony on the recent tragic loss of his son-in-law due to suicide. He closed, by stating that his son-in-law was recently medically discharged from the military in March due to PTSD and anxiety.

Mr. JP Nolan, was recognized, he is a former specialist in the Army and a Corporal in the Marine Corp. He shared some of the VA resources that were available to help him during his crisis and also enforcing Red Flag Laws.

Without any further business the meeting adjourned at 3:07 p.m.