



## Maine Veterans Coordinating Committee Meeting (MVCC)

Subject: Minutes from the 5 February 2024 Meeting of the MVCC

From: Brenda Pennels, Secretary

Meeting was conducted virtually via Zoom from 3pm -4:15 pm. Chair Kelley Wynne opened the meeting with the Pledge of Allegiance. Kevin Woodward offered a prayer.

**ROLL CALL - Introduction** of Guests: A record 53 attendees for this meeting including many 1<sup>st</sup> time attendees: BG Diane Dunn was introduced as the new Maine Adjutant General.

<b>Last Name</b>	<b>First Name</b>	<b>Organization</b>
Asuncion	Joy	Honor Flight Maine, Maine Women's Ambassador
Barczyk	Jonathan	VHA
Barresi-Saucier	Joy	Executive Director Aroostook Agency on Aging
Blair	Brenda	VFW Aux
Blair	Mike	VFW
Bover	Jennifer	VBA
Brawn	Mike	VBA
Burgess	Eddie Gray-Fox	Wellness Mobile
Byerly	Kelsey	Senator Collins
Cummings	Brian	Fed/Cap Veterans Forward
Davis	Tracye	VHA
Dunn	Diane BG	Adjutant General, ME
Fitzgerald	Lindsey	MVH
<b>Florey</b>	<b>Craig</b>	<b>DAV, MVCC 1st Vice Chair</b>
Ford	Ed	Senator Collins
Gaddis	Joyce	DAV
Gillis	Kristin	Healthy Affiliates Maine
Gordon	Kristen	Paralyzed Veterans of America New England Chapter
Higgins	Kylie	CDCE and Voluntary Services
Kelley	Sam	Vet2Vet
Kezer	Gail	Senator King
Kimble	Anthony	VFW
<b>King</b>	<b>Angus</b>	<b>Senator, Guest speaker</b>
Kinney	Melinda	Martin's Point Government Affairs

Kuracz	Khristina	ME Arts Commission
Lee	Sal	Senator King
Libby	Bill MG	MOAA/Vet2Vet
Loiselle	Paul	MOAA, FEDPOINT
Lorraine	Ryan	MBVS
Mathis	George	DAV Bangor- Veteran advocate
Mayhew	Rachel	Need affiliation
McCann	Rob	VHA
McGhee	Chris	Veteran, Private Practice Attorney
McLaughlin	Angela	FedCAP Career Specialist
Morris	Teague	Senator King
O'Brien	Perry	Pine Tree Legal
Ogden	Peter	Vietnam Veterans Association
Parent	Richard	VFW
<b>Patch</b>	<b>David</b>	<b>MOAA, MVCC 2nd Vice Chair</b>
<b>Pennels</b>	<b>Brenda</b>	<b>MOAA, MVCC Secretary</b>
Phillips	Nic	MEARNG
Richmond	Dave	MBVS Director
Robichaud	Jamie	MBVS
Robinson	Rowland	Senator King
Rohn	Kim	Congressman Golden
San Pedro	Steve	VFW
Slininger	Kim	Veteran, VFW, Equine Therapy Program
Smith	Christina	VBA
Twinward	Pam	Congresswoman Pingree
Twombly	Nathaniel	Congresswoman Pingree Fellow
Ware	James	VFW
<b>Woodward</b>	<b>Kevin</b>	<b>VFW, MVCC Treasurer</b>
<b>Wynne</b>	<b>Kelley</b>	<b>Amvets, MVCC Chair</b>

### **Guest Speaker: Senator Angus King**

Senator King gave opening remarks about the function of the Senate Veterans Committee, the bipartisan nature of the committee and that the committee was one of the most productive committees in the Senate. Senator King encouraged people to reach out to him directly at [King.senate.gov](mailto:King.senate.gov), or to Teague Morris or Rowland Robinson with issues that the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee needed to be aware of. Senator King then addressed the Long Term Care for Veterans field hearing that was held in Maine on January 26<sup>th</sup> at the University of Maine, Augusta. Key Takeaways were: staffing and workforce issues across all entities, reimbursement rate-VA and Medicaid reimbursement rate is flat while expenses are increasing, insufficient assisted living options for veterans. Senator King also addressed his concerns about servicemembers transitioning from actively serving to veteran status and the risk of suicide in the transition period. Working on many initiatives to improve the transition process. He also recognized the need to decrease the time that it is taking to hire individuals in the VA health system.

Issues from the attendees were:

- 1.) Emergency transportation for veterans with a disability rating of less than 30%. Kelley Wynne pointed out that this issue was raised at the June 2023 roundtable. Senator King stated that this was still being worked on.

- 2.) Caregiver Support for Veterans – support currently available for the family member caring for the veteran but not the veteran caring for a family member. Senator King will take this back to his team for further investigation. Asked about prevalence – Dave Patch indicated that it was probably similar to those of spouses taking care of veterans as couples tend to be of the same approximate age.
- 3.) Requested support for two Senate bills regarding TRICARE. SB 956 – Healthcare Fairness for Military Families which would allow dependents to stay on their parents TRICARE plan to age 26 (parity with commercial insurance) and SB 1670 – TRICARE Fairness for the National Guard and Reserve Act which would align TRICARE coverage with military retired pay. (Gray-area retirees are eligible for early retired pay, before age 60, based on post 2008 deployments, but TRICARE eligibility remains at age 60. The TRICARE option available to these retirees prior to age 60 is unsubsidized and prohibitively expensive at \$585 monthly for an individual or \$1406 for a family. Senator King will have his team do more research on these bills but cannot make a promise to support at this time.
- 4.) VA covered residential care is only for those veterans with a 70% or greater disability rating. One of the topics discussed at the Jan 26<sup>th</sup> field hearing on LTC.
- 5.) Kelley Wynne brought up the issue that incarcerated veterans don't have medical coverage through the VA during their incarceration period, and that upon release, usually to a halfway house or other facility, they are not eligible for VA healthcare. The proposal is that veterans in the halfway house be allowed to get care at the CBOC. Dave Patch brought up the example of a 100% rated veteran being denied a mental health appointment because they were in a halfway house. Senator King agreed to take on as an assignment for further review.
- 6.) Steve San Pedro brought up the issue of the spouses of 100% disabled veterans that are eligible for TRICARE not being able to enroll in CHAMP-VA which could save money, particularly on prescription drug costs. Brenda Pennells explained that CHAMP-VA beneficiaries under age 65 had a co-insurance of 25% for all medical costs (except RX's) so that TRICARE would be more beneficial for this population. Once turning 65 however CHAMP-VA beneficiaries are required to have Medicare B but would then have no Out of Pocket costs for medical costs and could obtain RX's at no charge through CHAMP-VA mail order program. The ask is that military retirees have the choice of TRICARE or CHAMP-VA for their dependents.
- 7.) Chris McGhee (veteran, private practice attorney) thanked Senator King for his project on veteran suicide by job code.
- 8.) George Mathis brought up the issue of homeless veterans in the Bangor area. His concern is that illegal immigrants are being housed in hotels while homeless veterans are still living on the streets. Kelley Wynne described a similar problem in Waterville. Senator King discussed local resources including Preble Street Project at Veterans Forward (Brian Cummings on the call) and urged people to work with their local legislators. Also gave statistics on asylum seekers (85% are denied and have to leave) and brought up the Border Security Bill that would be voted on this week.

**Secretary's report:** Motion made and seconded to approve the January minutes; motion carried. Discussion regarding timing of the meetings. Vote to be taken at the end of the meeting regarding changing all future meetings to 3pm.

**Treasurer's report.** Kevin provided the following information:

- Checking \$5346.80. CD's 2437.62. 2 grant checks for \$500 each were mailed to Honor Flight Maine and Maine Historical Society.

Motion made and seconded to accept the Treasurer's Report. Motion carried.

## **Reports:**

### **#1 Senator Collins – Ed Ford**

- Senator Collins wanted to share that on January 25, the bipartisan Train More Nurses Act was unanimously passed in the Senate. The Act, introduced by Senator Jacky Rosen (D-NV), was cosponsored by Senator Collins and Senator Mike Braun (R-IN). The legislation addresses the nursing shortage that affects communities all

across the nation. <https://www.collins.senate.gov/newsroom/collins-bipartisan-bill-to-address-nursing-shortage-passes-the-senate>

## #2 VA Maine HCS –Tracye Davis Executive Director VA Maine

Developments in the Capital Projects: the CLC project is delayed again due to a recommendation made that roof design should be upgraded. Roof trusses will be upgraded which requires a contract modification. Building completion now targeted for 2025. The Substance Abuse Residential Treatment Facility contract will be awarded this week. Next month will announce who the contractor is and the timeline. Presque Isle CBOC is on track. Contractor is moving quickly to address issues on the punch list, VA may accept ownership this week but definitely by the end of the month. Will begin to see patients within 90 days of taking ownership. Ribbon cutting TBA, will probably be in the April – May timeframe.

## #3 Senator King – Teague Morris Outreach Director

- In response to the discussion with Senator King about veteran homelessness Teague offered that Dan Hodgkins Senior Director of Social Work at Preble Street was the individual that Senator King was speaking of and that he may be a good speaker for an upcoming MVCC meeting.
- Teague reminded everyone that he produces a weekly policy update on veterans' issues. He shared his contact info in the chat: [Teague.morris@senate.king.gov](mailto:Teague.morris@senate.king.gov) , phone 207-252-8997. He also shared this article about the January 26<sup>th</sup> LTC field hearing. <https://www.veterans.senate.gov/2024/1/field-hearing-the-state-of-veterans-long-term-care-in-maine>

## #4 Veterans Benefits Administration – Jennifer Bover Executive Director

- Will share more info about the results from the February 4<sup>th</sup> Veterans and Community Expo at the next meeting. Next event will be in June in Aroostook County. Details coming soon!

**AdHoc Community Outreach:** This outreach is in addition to regular and reoccurring outreach in the community.

- Veteran Employment and Resource Fair, January 8<sup>th</sup>, Skowhegan
- Met with LL Bean Veteran's Resource Group, January 12<sup>th</sup>, Freeport
- Veteran Employment and Resource Fair, January 16<sup>th</sup>, Clinton
- Veteran Employment and Resource Fair, January 19<sup>th</sup>, Farmington
- Veteran Resource Fair, January 20<sup>th</sup>, American Legion, Sabattus
- Homeless Point in Time Count, January 24<sup>th</sup>, Sisters in Arms and Bread of Life, Augusta
- Veteran and Community Connection Expo, February 4<sup>th</sup>, Pineland Farms, New Gloucester

### January In-Office Outreach:

- 680 Veterans served by telephone, video, or in-person

### Reminders:

**Up-to-Date Information:** Please sign-up for **GovDelivery** to receive the latest updates on our outreach efforts and learn helpful information on benefits.



Sign-up for  
GovDelivery.pdf

**#5 Congresswoman Chellie Pingree’s Office - Pam Twinward**

- Introduced new Fellow Nate Twobley, USM student and Marine Corps veteran.
- January was a quiet month for veterans affairs: There were no bills, suspensions or legislation.
- Staff is working on the appropriations for Military Construction and VA budget. Closes March 1<sup>st</sup>. Suggestions can be made to Pam who will refer ideas/issues to the DC staff.

**#6 Center for Development and Civic Engagement –Chief Veteran Experience Officer - Kylie Higgins**

**National Salute to Veteran Patient Week (schedule attached)**



NATL SALUTE WEEK  
ACTIVITIES SCHEDULE

Point of Contact: Sarah Goodman and Kylie Higgins 207-621-4886

\*\*All sites of care to include Togus and CBOCs will be participating

\*\*If you would like to sign up to come in and Volunteer next week, please also reach out to Kylie directly or to Sarah.Goodman2@va.gov

\*\*If you are not able to come in and volunteer next week, but would still like to help, if you are part of any school, business, or Veteran service organization and are able to pull together some homemade Valentines for Veterans and can get them to our office by Wednesday February 14th, we would hand those out throughout the week during the scheduled events. These have always been well received by our Veterans especially our inpatient Veterans and serve as a special way to show appreciation (address in my signature block) or drop them off to your closest VA location!

**Fisher House Program Updates**

<b>HOTELS FOR HEROES</b>					
	<b>Families Served</b>	<b>Guests Accommodated</b>	<b>Lodging Days</b>	<b>Savings To Families</b>	
Prior HFH	616	1,121	1,059	237,216	Hotels For Heroes (HFH)
January 2024	30	52	43	9,632	Hotels For Heroes (HFH)
<b>TOTAL HFH</b>	<b>646</b>	<b>1,173</b>	<b>1,102</b>	<b>246,848</b>	<b>Hotels For Heroes (HFH)</b>

<b>GRAND TOTALS – COMBINED FISHER HOUSE &amp; HOTELS FOR HEROES</b>					
	<b>Families Served</b>	<b>Guests Accommodated</b>	<b>Lodging Days</b>	<b>Savings To Families</b>	
2020-2023	1,582	2,840	3,495	660,960	Fisher House & HFH
January 2024	30	52	43	9,632	Hotels For Heroes (HFH)
<b>TOTAL HFH</b>	<b>1,612</b>	<b>2,892</b>	<b>3,538</b>	<b>670,592</b>	<b>Grand Total - Both</b>

**CDCE Centenarian Recognition Program. Contact** Kylie Higgins 207-623-8411 x3398 or by e-mail for information/submission.

#### **#7 Congressman Jared Golden's Office – Kim Rohn**

- Late December Maine Congressional delegation send a letter to the VA requesting the VA provide reliable Wifi at all of the Maine CBOC's. <https://golden.house.gov/media/press-releases/congressional-delegation-urges-va-to-ensure-reliable-wi-fi-service-at-maine-cboocs>
- Congressman Golden also looking for a Green and Gold Fellow. Can be flexible with office location.
- Congressman Golden's Service Academy 11 nominees are beginning to get their offers of admission from the Service Academies. 2 students already received their letters.
- Attended the ceremony for the retirement of MG Farham as TAG and transfer of responsibility to BG Diane Dunn at Camp Chamberlain last Friday.

#### **#8 Maine Veterans Homes –Lindsay Fitzgerald for Sharon Fusco.**

- Lindsay is Chief Workforce Officer for Sharon.
- Sharon will be meeting with members of the Congressional delegation this week.
- Still working on funding – working with VSO's on letter-writing and phone campaigns. Call to Action for MVCC – if anyone is interested in doing the advocacy work to help MVH obtain funding, please email Sharon Fusco at [Sharon.Fusco@mainevets.org](mailto:Sharon.Fusco@mainevets.org). They will provide a toolkit including talking points, email templates etc.

#### **#9 Maine Bureau of Veterans Services – Jamie Robichaud for Dave Richmond**

- No updates at this time, except to reinforce the success of the Expo on Sunday February 4<sup>th</sup>.

#### **#10 Open Discussion**

- Vote taken on changing the meetings to 3pm permanently. Vote was approximately 22 to 8 in favor of 3pm. Because there were many that did not vote, the option was given to email the Secretary after the meeting with their preference. Update: the only votes that came in after the meeting were in favor of moving all meetings to Monday at 3pm. Therefore, going forward the meetings will be at 3pm.

The next meeting will be held at 3pm on March 4<sup>th</sup> via Zoom. Speaker is TBD but will be a homeless veteran focus. Also, BG Dunn has been invited, if she is able to speak it will be communicated in the meeting invite going out next week.

Link for Zoom: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84773217133?pwd=dFNhT1dLcHBWOFBVRHhNiMXk1cHZLZz09>

Kevin Woodward offered a closing prayer. Meeting adjourned at 4:20pm.