



Progress In Advancing Convention Resolutions

Current Convention Resolutions are posted at www.vva.org/OrgDocs/VVA-Resolutions.pdf

Agent Orange/Dioxin

BY MAYNARD KADERLIK, CHAIR



AO-1 Research on Agent Orange/Dioxin Effects: The final update of *Vietnam and Agent Orange, 2014*, is anticipated. VVA continues to gain cosponsors for H.R.1769 and S.901, the Toxic Exposure Research Act, which directs the VA secretary to select one VA Medical Center to serve as the national center for the research, diagnosis, and treatment of health conditions of descendants of those exposed to toxic substances while in the armed forces.

AO-2 Agent Orange/Dioxin Children's Registry; Recognizing the Connection Between Dioxin and Learning Disabled Children: VVA continues to work closely with Birth Defect Research for Children (BDRC), the only toxic substances birth defects registry, to track information on military exposures in Vietnam and during the Gulf War. At Agent Orange town hall meetings, veterans are encouraged to register their children and grandchildren with BDRC. This registry will play a critical role when the Toxic Research Act of 2015 is enacted, providing expert testimony and toxic exposure birth defect data.

AO-4 VVA Agent Orange/Dioxin Guide: Since August 2012 VVA has distributed 115,000 Agent Orange guides. The highly regarded guide has undergone three revisions and continues to provide timely and accurate information on Agent Orange presumptive conditions and benefits.

AO-5 Assure Proper Implementation of the Agent Orange Act of 1991: The authority to enter into agreement with the National Academy of Sciences regarding associations between diseases and exposure to dioxin and other chemical compounds was extended through December 31, 2016, so the work on *Vietnam and Agent Orange Update, 2014* could be completed. The Agent Orange Extension Act, H.R.3423, was introduced in the 114th Congress and, when passed, will extend and expand the 1991 Act. We need to encourage all members of Congress to reinstate it, as it is the foundation for all other Agent Orange and toxic substances programs and research.

AO-7 Children's Health Care: VVA chapters and state councils have convened more than two hundred Faces of Agent Orange town halls. As a result of this grassroots effort, the Toxic Research Act is before Congress. If enacted, this bill will provide for research and treatment for those offspring with

birth defects and health issues associated with their parents' exposure to toxic chemicals while in military service.

AO-8 Agent Orange/Dioxin Network: The Agent Orange network is ever-expanding. Town hall meetings continue to engage veterans in their communities; the number of followers is growing on the Faces of Agent Orange Facebook page and YouTube channel; and we are receiving an increasing number of inquiries regarding Agent Orange health effects and benefits.

AO-10 Ban the Manufacturing/Sale and Use of 2,4-D: We continue to educate veterans and the public on the dangers of 2,4-D.

AO-13 Agent Orange/Dioxin Awareness Month: VVA observes October as Agent Orange Awareness Month.

AO-14 Hearing Loss Added to the List of Birth Defects Due to Exposure to Agent Orange: The Toxic Exposure Research Act, when enacted, will address hearing loss and other Agent Orange-related birth defects.

AO-15 Government's Responsibility for Veterans' Right to Know: VVA had a recent victory in the Edgewood Chem/Bio Testing Appeal (*see* article, page 32), when the court affirmed an injunction ordering the U.S. Army to provide all former test subjects with any newly acquired information about the substances to which they were exposed.

AO-16 Blue Water Veterans' Exposure During the Vietnam War: The VA has ruled on some disappointing changes in the areas that give the sailors service connection. The Blue Water Association continues to work on this issue through litigation. VVA continues to support Vietnam veterans who served in Southeast Asia in the Navy. VVA will continue to advocate for early passage of S.681 and H.R.969.

No action was taken on AO-6, AO-7, AO-9, and AO-12.

The Agent Orange and Other Toxic Substances Committee: Maynard Kaderlik, Chair; Jack McManus, Vice Chair; Robert Behrens, Vice Chair. Members: Sandie Wilson, George Claxton, Marc McCabe, Mike Demske, Dennis Andras, Bruce Dobson, Stephen Bowers, Nate Washington, Rossie Nance, and Luther Newberry. Special Advisors: John Weiss, Tom Owen, Paul Sutton, Jim Doyle, Steve House, John Rossie, Wes Carter, Robert Cummings, Ken Holybee, John Wells, Billee Culin, Betty Mekdeci, Sandra Morgan, Elizabeth Bowers, Herb Worthington, Charlie Montgomery, Frank Arminio, Carlton Rhodes, Ronald Morgan, Gerald Ney, and Anthony

Musolino. AVVA Advisors: Kathy Andras, Percilla Newberry, and Nancy Switzer. VVA Staff Support: Mokie Pratt Porter, Bernie Edelman, and Rick Weidman.

Economic Opportunities

BY FRANK BARRY, CHAIR



Public Affairs Resolution P-7 requires that each committee report annually to the membership on its progress in implementing the organization's resolutions. Here is a progress report on the resolutions of the Economic Opportunities Committee. Please note that this is just a sampling of the involvement of our committee members.

Jobs and Job Training: Every two years VVA prepares its legislative agenda. The EOC is working with congressional staff to ensure that veterans returning from deployments overseas are accorded Veterans' Preference when applying for government jobs and are given every advantage when seeking employment in private industry or attempting to set up their own businesses. Jobs will focus on in-demand occupations such as IT and the healing arts. Committee member Ted Daywalt of VetJobs reports monthly on veteran employment statistics. Special Advisor Joe Wynn of VETForce continues to attend job fairs and keep the EOC up to date on job opportunities.

The EOC is working with the Department of Labor to ensure that the Transition Assistance Program actually helps service members leave the military knowing most of their options for employment, education, and entrepreneurship and where they can seek additional information. DOL staff regularly attend EOC meetings to keep members informed.

The EOC and VVA are working with Congress and the Department of Labor to significantly reform the Veterans Employment and Training Service Program so that it actually matches veterans with jobs.

The committee supports Operation Veteran Empowerment, a 501(c)3 web-based Internet educational platform that provides educational resources for veteran entrepreneurs and veteran business owners.

Veterans Business Development: Committee members are working with agencies and committees to promote veterans business development, including: the Small Business Association Veterans Business

Advisory Committee, the Interagency Task Force on Veterans Small Business Development, the Women Veterans Igniting the Spirit of Entrepreneurship, Entrepreneurship Boot Camp for Veterans with Disabilities, and the Veteran Business Outreach Centers.

SUPPORTING LEGISLATION

H.R.475, the GI Bill Processing Improvement Act of 2015, intended to improve the processing of education assistance claims by requiring electronic adjudication.

H.R.476, the GI Bill Education Quality Enhancement Act of 2015, calls for approval of certain courses by state approving agencies.

H.R.1141, the GI Bill Fairness Act of 2015, directs the VA to consider the time spent by members of the Guard and Reserves for medical care by DOD as active duty time for purposes of post-9/11 education assistance.

H.R.1694 adds veteran-owned businesses to the DoL category of small business preference groups.

H.R.1382, BRAVE (Boosting Rates of American Veteran Employment) Act, authorizes a preference to VA contractors who hire veterans.

H.R.1023, the Small Business Investment Company (SBIC) Capital Act of 2015, expands the amount of capital available through small business investment.

H.R.3016, the Veterans Employment, Education, and Health Care Improvement Act, has five titles. Title II contains something that VVA has advocated for repeatedly—creating a fourth administration at the VA called the Veteran Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration (VEOTA) to transfer all the programs and functions of the Veterans Employment and Training Service from DoL. Other titles under the bill include Veterans Health Care, Educational Assistance and Vocational Rehabilitation, Administration of Educational Assistance, and other matters, including eliminating the loan limit that capped the amount of money VA guarantees under the VA's home loan program.

The Economic Opportunities Committee: Frank Barry, Chair; Ted Daywalt, Vice Chair. Members: Dennis Andras, Larry Carter, Marc Goldschmitt, Dave Johnston, Keith King, and Victor Klingelhofer. AVVA Advisors: Sharon Hobbs, Nancy Rekowski, and Jeri Wallis. Special Advisors: Joe Wynn and Carl Tuvin. VVA Staff Support: Rick Weidman.

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Government Affairs

BY PETE PETERSON, CHAIR



Here is our assessment of the resolutions handled by VVA's Department of Government Affairs:

G-7 Service Connection for Hepatitis C: There has been little that we can

do to promote this. However, we have fought for VA funding to purchase the new drug, Harvoni, so that hundreds, if not thousands, of veterans with hep C who receive VA health care can be cured. Harvoni has a cure rate of more than 95 percent.

G-9 Awarding of the Combat Medevac Badge (CMB): This is not a hot-button issue either in Congress or the Department of Defense. Hence, we've made no progress in securing approval for the CMB.

G-13 Cessation and Prohibition of the Utilization of U.S. Military Personnel as Non-Consensual Participants in the Testing by the U.S. Government of Vaccines and Other Medical Treatments: We continue to press DoD on nonconsensual inoculations that are not FDA approved. We aren't making much headway. However, in our many efforts to pass such legislation as the Toxic Exposure Research Act and to pursue lawsuits against government entities concerning the lack of appropriate response to exposures of troops to toxic substances, we hope to illuminate this issue.

G-14 State Veterans Homes: We continue our efforts in support of this resolution by working with the Conference of State Council Presidents, the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs, the National Association of State Veterans Homes, and the National Governors Association to ensure that state veterans homes receive needed funding for the care, treatment, and support of aging, ill, and indigent veterans.

G-17 Proper Use of Real Estate at the West Los Angeles VA Medical Center: VVA opposed the use of the undeveloped property at the West Los Angeles VA Medical Center for purposes other than those consistent with the intentions of the original donor. In 2011 VVA joined the ACLU and sued the VA for wrongful misuse of this land. Last year VVA won a victory when the VA signed an agreement dedicating West LA Medical Center land to homeless veterans.

This year the VA Secretary and attorneys representing homeless veterans in Los Angeles finalized the deal by announcing a historic written agreement that dedicates the West Los Angeles VA campus to serving veterans in need. VVA will continue to support this resolution and ensure that the VA is in compliance with the intent of the agreement.

Homeless Veterans

BY SANDY MILLER, CHAIR



HV-1 Homeless Veterans as a "Special Needs Population": The committee feels that, with the current push on the VA Five-Year Plan to End Veteran Homelessness, we are seeing a fair

share of money going into veteran homelessness.

HV-6 VA Homeless Grant and Per Diem Funding: As recently as February, the VA has been evaluating current Grant and Per Diem Programs. The GPD office is looking into its payment method and has made great strides in streamlining the payment of per diem dollars to providers. It is also looking into the possibility of collapsing or merging multiple project numbers associated with a program under a single number. With the focus being on "Housing First" and placement into permanent housing, it would appear there will be no movement toward establishing supportive service grants to offset or augment the Service Center grantees. The committee will continue its efforts in favor of supportive service grants.

HV-7 Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP) to Remain at the U.S. Department of Labor (DoL) and Be Fully Funded at the Authorized \$50 Million: With the creation of the "fourth arm" of the VA being proposed, the committee now supports this move, if, in fact, there would be a continuation of oversight of performance of the HVRP program. The committee will continue to push for full funding at the \$50 million level. The authorized funding has been \$50 million for years; however, the appropriations have leveled out at around \$38 million.

HV-8 Support for Continued Funding and Oversight of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development/U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Supportive Services (HUD/VASH) Program: The continued funding of the HUD/VASH Program has successfully reduced veteran homelessness. We continue to insist on oversight to evaluate outcomes and effectiveness.

HV-10 Continued Funding for "Special Needs" Grants Under the Department of Veterans Affairs Homeless Grants and Per Diem Program: Extending the authority that ended on September 30, 2015, was accomplished with a renewed extension until September 30, 2016. Having to renew this valuable funding stream every year continues to be an issue. The committee would like to see this authority extended for five years.

HV-11 The Department of Veterans Affairs to Identify Best Practices Model Addressing Homeless Women Veteran Transitional Residential Treatment Programs Through VA Homeless Grants and Per Diem: The VA continues to focus on transitional residential treatment pro-

grams throughout the entire system. To the committee's knowledge, there has not been any movement to identify best practice models.

HV-12 Extend the Department of Labor Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program Criteria for Veterans Placed in "Housing First" Model: The committee is not aware of any change to the current regulation indicating that a veteran must be homeless in order to access HVRP training. There was legislation that would have allowed those being placed through "Housing First" to gain access to training for up to six months after housing placement. However, that legislation did not move forward. We will continue to seek legislation that provides training for recently placed veterans.

HVC-13 Support for the Missing in America Project: The committee continues to support this effort and recognizes the many VVA chapters and state councils across the country that provide dignified burials for all those who served.

HVC-14 Support, Oversight, and Accountability of VA Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF): The committee continues to follow the regulations for these valuable programs. With recent changes and belt tightening, the committee feels the program is on the right track. We will continue to monitor the data provided by the VA on these programs. By having SSVF grantees submit extensive quarterly reports, the committee feels that those agencies that are not compliant will be weeded out quickly.

The Homeless Veterans Committee: Sandy Miller, Chair; Tom Hall, Ph.D., Vice Chair. Members: Joe McIntyre, Kate O'Hare-Palmer, Jerry Yamamoto, and Dave Johnston. AVVA Advisors: Cathy Keister, Joanna Henshaw, and Nancy Switzer. Special Advisor: Tom Berger, Ph.D. VVA Staff Support: Sharon Hodge.

Membership Affairs

BY CHARLIE HOBBS, CHAIR



The Membership Affairs Committee, as required by Public Affairs Resolution P-7, provides this yearly report to the membership.

M-2 Communication Among VVA's Organizational Levels: The national office must reply to all communications from state councils and chapters within five working days and state councils and chapters must reply to all communications from the national office within ten working days. M-2 remains viable and was overwhelmingly endorsed at the 2015 National Convention.

As of this writing, the estimated total from the Life Membership Fire Sale is

7,909. This estimate is based on the processed applications; there are many applications pending confirmation of DD214s. During the January Board of Directors meeting in Silver Spring, the Board approved the permanent reduction of Life Membership dues to \$100. The revised application is on page 5 of this issue and on the website; new membership application tri-folds that reflect the reduced rate will be printed.

The Second Annual Membership Growth Award program came to a close February 29. I will announce the winners in each category at the Leadership & Education Conference in Tucson. I believe it will be a record year.

The Membership Affairs Committee: Charlie Hobbs, Chair; Steve Mackey, Vice Chair. Members: Dick Southern, Richard DeLong, Joseph Kristek, Richard W. Lindbeck, Charlie Montgomery, Jerry Pounds, Barry Rice, Rex Moody, Ted Wilkinson, Larry Frazee, Ray Autenrieb, and John Weiss. Special Advisor: Bill Meeks. AVVA Advisor: Cathy Keister. VVA Staff Support: Tracie Houston.

Minority Affairs

BY JERRY YAMAMOTO, CHAIR



The Minority Affairs Committee has twelve Convention Resolutions we actively support. These resolutions recognize the contributions of Vietnam veterans who are ethnic minorities from all

areas of the world. We appreciate their decision to participate in VVA and their contributions in the name of veterans in their communities and support for veterans of all eras.

Our committee's primary goal is to recruit more members for VVA through our committee's participation in conferences and other activities with our membership and health benefit information booths nationwide. We will focus this coming year on participating in activities of our most underrepresented Vietnam veterans, Native Americans. The committee asks all VVA members to help us recruit Native American veterans. It begins with your participation in their powwows, meetings, and conferences and follows with invitations to participate in your chapter's meetings and activities.

I wish to thank the members of our committee for their great help, support, and advice in developing our goals, agenda, and programs. On behalf of the committee, I wish to thank all veterans for supporting the Minority Affairs Committee and its mission, goals, activities, and members.



The Minority Affairs Committee: Jerry Yamamoto, Chair; Francisco Ivarra, Vice Chair; Jorge Pedroza, Vice Chair; Gumersindo Gomez, Vice Chair for Hispanic Affairs; Stephen Bowers, Vice Chair for Native Americans. Members: Dave Simmons, Wayne Reynolds, Joe Jennings, Pete Peterson, Gerry Ney, Kerwin Stone, and Virgie Hibbler. Special Advisors: James Maddox, Connie Steers, Linda Blankenship, Henry Urioste, Paul Washington, Anthony Molina, and Manuel Pedraza. AVVA Advisor: Joanna Henshaw. VVA Staff Support: Bernie Edelman.

POW/MIA Affairs

BY GRANT COATES, CO-CHAIR



In accordance with VVA Convention Resolution P-7, the POW/MIA Affairs Committee presents its annual report.

PM-3 Declassification of Information and Diligent Effort:

The POW/MIA Committee monitors the actions of the National Declassification Center. More than 530 cubic feet (598 boxes) containing records of various Army commands and secret correspondences have been declassified.

The House Committee on Armed Services has directed the Secretary of Defense, as part of the reorganization of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA), to submit a report to the House and Senate Committees by March 1, 2016, identifying specific inefficiencies in the declassification process that hinder recovery efforts.

PM-4 Americans Missing in Laos and Cambodia: Efforts continue to improve relations with Laos and Cambodia to further recovery missions there. DPAA Director Mike Linnington has visited Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, three major countries of the Vietnam War. While in Laos, he visited DPAA and Lao personnel conducting field operations. The POW/MIA Committee was informed of the activities.

PM-7 Possibility of Live POW/MIAs, and Facilitating the Return of Those Who Remain in Southeast Asia: VVA has formally acknowledged the possibility of live Americans being left in Southeast Asia at the end of the Vietnam War, and elsewhere worldwide as a result of later military operations and war. Until all known missing in action from the Vietnam War are accounted for and returned, no change to the resolution is foreseen.

PM-8 Fullest Possible Accounting of POW/MIAs in Vietnam: The POW/MIA Affairs Committee continues to receive timely information from DPAA and other organizations regarding accountability of the missing in action from the Vietnam War. The names of all identified MIAs are immediately announced through mass media. For

various reasons, including wishes of the families, DoD announcements are often delayed and sometimes are never made.

PM-11 Honoring All Returned POWs, and Giving Recognition of American Civilians Held as POW/Interned During WWII: VVA urges all chapters and state councils to seek opportunities to honor local ex-POWs and their families. In addition, VVA desires that Congress enact legislation to formally recognize the sacrifices of these individuals.

VVA commends the extraordinary service rendered by those public servants, military personnel, and citizens who have devoted their lives, vocations, time, and personal resources to resolving the issue of prisoners and missing from the Vietnam War and other conflicts.

PM-13 Public Awareness and Education on the POW/MIA Flag: VVA will continue to educate public officials and others on the history and meaning of the POW/MIA flag and its proper display under P.L.101-355.

Every VVA function that displays the national colors must include the POW/MIA flag. The POW/MIA flag will be posted to the immediate left of the national colors. All other flags in the display shall be flown to the left of the POW/MIA flag, following standard positioning protocol.

PM-14 Forever POW/MIA Stamp: H.R.3558, the Perpetual POW/MIA Stamp Act, was introduced by Rep. Gus M. Bilirakis on September 18, 2015. To date there are only ten co-sponsors.

VI-1 The Veterans Initiative, A National VVA Effort on Vietnam's Missing in Action: In an effort to receive more information about the Vietnamese missing in action, the committee created a new public service announcement, "The Veterans Initiative Needs Your Help." See www.vva.org/Committees/POW_MIA/index.html The end result of this veteran-to-veteran collaboration between VVA and Vietnamese organizations hopefully will be the return of Americans missing in action.

VI-2 Scope of the Veterans Initiative: The primary mission of the Veterans Initiative is to achieve the fullest possible accounting of all POW/MIAs in Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

The POW/MIA Affairs Committee: Grant Coates, Co-Chair; Richard DeLong, Co-Chair. Members: Ray Autenrieb, Lawrence Carter, Terry Courville, Patti Dumin, Allen Harvey, Charlie Hobbs, Steve Mackey, Ted Wilkinson, and Ron Zink. Special Advisors: Kaye Gardner, Susie Stephens-Harvey, Gary Jones, Bill Duker, and Dan Carr. AVVA Advisor: Jeri Wallis. VVA Support Staff: Sharon Hodge and Mokie Pratt Porter.

PTSD & Substance Abuse

BY THOMAS C. HALL, Ph.D., CHAIR



There is much more work to be done in 2016 and 2017. Access to treatments for PTSD continues to fall behind need at the VA. Suicide by veterans and active duty personnel continues to increase. Substance abuse, often begun as self-medication for the symptoms of PTSD, continues to ruin lives and families.

As the VA's most ardent critical friend in the area of behavioral health, the members of the PTSD/SA Committee continue to encourage those following these issues to get involved locally and nationally. Often it is the small things that get noticed. So, break the inertia and move our leaders to address policy and legislation that better serve veterans.

The following list of activities undertaken by committee members is not exhaustive and is meant only to suggest the kind of activities that might assist veterans in coming all the way home.

- Presented on suicide prevention in a veteran population at town hall meetings
- Worked with the medical professions to expand their understanding of PTSD
- Organized and participated in a symposium on PTSD and secondary PTSD
- Attended numerous workshops on the treatment of PTSD and substance abuse
- Worked with VA Medical Center directors to help maintain quality of service
- Partnered with Veterans Against Drugs supporting the National Drug Take Back sponsored by the DEA (Next Drug Take Back is scheduled for April 30)
- Helped organize an Agent Orange town hall meeting
- Participated in VA mental health summits
- Helped organize Veterans Treatment Courts
- Mentored veterans participating in Veterans Courts
- Volunteered to support veteran community programs
- Organized and worked in a stand-down for homeless veterans
- Supported the efforts of AVVA to build support addressing secondary traumatic stress
- Worked to organize Toxic Exposures and Hepatitis C town hall meetings

In partnership with our committee's national staff liaison, we also have moved the following issues forward: mental health services for incarcerated veterans; discharge upgrades for Vietnam vets diagnosed with PTSD after discharge; national PTSD and suicide awareness programs for the National Center for PTSD and the VA's National Suicide Crisis Center; revision of DoD's MST policies; VA's overprescribing of opioid medications for mental health

and chronic pain management; and VVA's Legislative Agenda.

The PTSD & Substance Abuse Committee: Thomas C. Hall, Ph.D., Chair; Fr. Phil Salois, Vice Chair. Members: Sandy Miller, Dan Stenvold, Jerry Yamamoto, Charlie Stapleton, Kate O'Hare-Palmer, Craig Tonjes, Jerry Pounds, Allan Perkal, and Ed Ryan, Ph.D. AVVA Advisors: Sandra Lopez, Elayne Mackey, Jeri Wallis, and Beverly Pounds. VVA Staff Support: Tom Berger, Ph.D.

Public Affairs

BY DENNIS HOWLAND, CHAIR



The committee met in October 2015 and January 2016. Our discussions focused on the importance of public affairs in our chapters and state councils. I am of the opinion that public affairs

plays an integral role in every part of Vietnam Veterans of America, including recruiting, fundraising, community service, and service to veterans. If your community doesn't know that you exist or what wonderful service you provide, the fault rests with each of you.

Maintaining a working relationship with local media on local events is important to your successes. When the media inquiry relates to national VVA issues, it is imperative that you pass that on to Silver Spring. Every chapter should have a sound and active public affairs program.

In January the committee sent a motion to the BOD to eliminate the use of the term "Vietnam era veteran." Some of the conversation and reasoning focused on the fact that there is no "World War II era veteran." Regardless where you served—stateside, Europe, or the South Pacific—you are a World War II veteran. You weren't an "era." The Korean War, same thing: Regardless of where you served, there was no "Korean War era veteran." And the list goes on. So the committee voted to refrain from use of "Vietnam era veteran" in favor of just "Vietnam veteran" or "Vietnam generation."

As we go about recruiting, we find that many Vietnam veterans who didn't serve in country question if they are Vietnam veterans and hesitate to join VVA because they don't think being an "era" vet allows them to join. Some 2.7 million served in support of the war around the world. We didn't fight alone, and we need to make sure those six million know they are welcome to join us and are appreciated.

In light of recent definitions by DoD Commemoration Committees and VA Secretary McDonald, this change makes more sense. McDonald believes everyone who served in the military between 1955

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and 1975 is a Vietnam veteran regardless of where they served.

I have received only one email to date questioning this move. I hope this answers any questions.

The committee also discussed the importance of chapters and state councils becoming 50th Anniversary Vietnam War Commemorative partners with the Secretary of Defense's Committee. It costs no money, requires a commitment from each partner, and offers an incredible amount of resources and support. With a renewed emphasis on the 50th anniversary, this would be a good move for those who haven't signed on.

Utah is working with the State Director of Veterans and Military Affairs to hold seven major events in March, including Vietnam Veterans Day on March 29, the national premier of the documentary film *Long Journey Home*, and the distribution of commemorative books to 47,000 Vietnam veterans in the state. Many resources for these events will be requested from the Commemorative Committee.

The Public Affairs Committee requests your input into branding VVA. President John Rowan asked us to brainstorm and come up with ideas that would perhaps represent today's VVA better than "Never Again Will One Generation of Veterans Abandon Another." Please email me your thoughts.

And, finally, I sincerely appreciate the support of all the Public Affairs Committee members. Being new to the chair had me a bit nervous, but one of the organization's best committees helped me make the transition.

The Public Affairs Committee: Dennis Howland, Chair. Members: Herb Worthington, Ron Morgan, Dan Stenvold, Dick Southern, Thomas W. Brown, Russ Fankell, Grant Coates, Maynard Kaderlik, Daniel Jackson, Ken Holybee, and Tom Devlin. AVVA Advisors: Beverly Pounds, Percilla Newberry, and Nancy Switzer. VVA Staff Support: Mokie Porter, Michael Keating, Wes Guidry, and Marc Leepson.

Veterans Against Drugs

BY DAVE SIMMONS, CHAIR



The Veterans Against Drugs Committee is very excited to move from a VVA task force to a committee. We are planning some updated and improved lesson plans for our Patriotism Program.

I have received requests for information on how to establish a Veterans Against Drugs program and it is always heartwarming to see a VVA chapter step forward to make an impact on illegal drugs and violence in its community. I have also received a request from an incarcerated member who

wants to work within the prison population on drug abuse and violence issues.

Many of our members have seen the DVD produced by Veterans Against Drugs. It's a very useful tool. We again thank the members of VVA Incarcerated Chapter 689 for their candid remarks and stories about the effects of drugs and violence in their lives.

In January Veterans Against Drugs again sponsored the Drug-Free Ice Skating Event at the Silver Spring, Md., Ice Rink. This was our fourth year providing a no-cost event for the young people in the community where the national VVA headquarters is located. Because the committee selected a date during the January BOD meeting, we were able to invite the National Officers and Board of Directors to join us and see what a successful event this has become. Special thanks to the office staff members who helped with this event. Go to www.vva.org/Committees/VAD/vad.html to see the skating videos.

Contact me, in care of the national office, for more information about Veterans Against Drugs.

Veterans Against Drugs: Dave Simmons, Chair; Patti Dumin, Vice Chair. Members: Richard DeLong, Carlton Rhodes, Allen Manuel, Ted Wilkinson, Dennis Andras, Adolph Gardner, Charlie Montgomery, Henry Urioste, John Weiss, Terry Courville, and Ray Bates. AVVA Advisors: Kathy Andras, John Birch, Elaine Simmons, Felicea Catapano, Margaret Wojciechowicz, and Kaye Gardner. Special Advisors: Patsy Varnell, Herb Worthington, Billee Culin, Paul Crowell, Rodney Farley, Mara Boggs, and U.S. Sen. John Manchin (D-W.Va.). Staff Advisor: Deborah Williams.

Veterans Benefits

BY TOM BURKE, CHAIR



In compliance with Public Affairs Resolution P-7, the following update is provided on the committee's efforts to advance the 2015 Convention Resolutions.

VB-1 Judicial Review:

Veterans are able to hire a private attorney or claims agent at any point during the claims process. However, a contingency fee agreement is allowed only after the filing of a Notice of Disagreement (NOD) and the fee agreement needs to be reasonable. Be advised that once a post-NOD agreement is entered into the record of the veteran, it can be difficult to remove. VVA continues to seek changes in the applicable law to protect the rights of all veterans to control all aspects of their representation before the VA.

VB-3 Less-Than-Honorable Administrative Discharges: In September 2014 Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel signed a directive ordering the Army, Navy, and

Air Force to implement supplemental guidance involving discharge upgrade applications relating to PTSD. The directive could affect upward of eighty thousand Vietnam veterans with PTSD who have other-than-honorable discharges. Outreach to veterans from other wars still needs to be accomplished. Most veterans are unaware that they can apply to the Board of Corrections of Military Records for upgrades. VVA will continue to seek the repeal of P.L.99-126 regarding the Carter administration's special discharge upgrade program. We are working toward having other-than-fully-honorable discharges replaced with certifies of service.

VB-5 Civil Liberties of Active Duty Military Personnel: VVA considers this an ongoing, unresolved issue.

VB-6 Just Compensation for Injuries Sustained by Active Duty Military Personnel: Active duty military personnel are often unable to recover adequate compensation for injuries that were due to negligence of government personnel. VVA continues to seek legislation or other appropriate action to secure a more equitable compensation for injured personnel.

VB-7 Class Actions at U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims: VVA continues to petition the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims to adopt a class-action rule applicable to claims before the court. This would allow veterans with identical issues to petition for relief within the court with jurisdiction over their benefits claims.

VB-9 VA Implementation of U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims Decisions: In 2011 VVA, along with Veterans for Common Sense, sought to use the federal courts to improve the speed and quality of VA benefits decisions. Unfortunately, this lawsuit was not successful, so veterans still have to pursue individual VA claims. The committee continues to work with VVA Government Affairs staff in urging Congress to provide for class actions to address veterans' concerns and enact systemic change instead of making each veteran fight his or her own battle.

VB-10 Veterans Benefits & Services: VVA, along with other veterans service organizations, continues to ask Congress to intercede and make the VA implement processes to improve its claims processing and delivery of services.

VB-11 Veterans Benefits System: The VA claims process is progressing toward fully digitized records. Although there are still paper files, the VA says that most have been scanned and nearly all claims are now processed without paper. The transition from paper to digitized claims processing is far from foolproof. VVA Veterans Benefits staff continue to work with VVA Government Affairs to improve the VA compensation system through legislative action, administrative advocacy, and meetings with VA executive staff. The committee continues to address issues related to the backlog, trying to improve work credits, and sug-

gesting improvements to the VA computer systems and ways to simplify VA regulations.

VB-12 Department of Veterans Affairs Service-Connected Disability Compensation Payments & Military Retirement Pay: Concurrent receipt of military retirement pay and VA disability has been phased in over the last several years. However, this only applies to those with 50 percent or higher VA disability ratings. Combat-related special compensation is also a way veterans can receive both military retirement pay and VA disability benefits (only those related to combat). Veterans must choose between the two programs each year. The committee continues to work with VVA Government Affairs staff to allow concurrent receipt for all veterans retired due to length of service with any VA disability rating. We also continue to encourage the full implementation of concurrent receipt for all levels of VA disability compensation.

VB-13 Preservation of VVA Service Representation at the National Level: At the national level, VVA continues to retain high-quality attorneys for representation of veterans claims. The Veterans Benefits Program policies have been re-written to more clearly define a service officer's duties and responsibilities. This remains a work in progress; upgrades are implemented as changes occur. Service officer training is available on VVA's website. The VVA Service Officer Grant program procedures have been upgraded. This remains a high priority.

VB-16 Copy of Military Records upon Discharge: The committee has worked with Government Affairs staff to improve the integration of DoD and VA health records to create a virtual lifetime electronic record. Providing complete and workable records has been the subject of much discussion, testimony, and meetings with VA staff. The committee also works with VVA Veterans Benefits and Government Affairs staff to monitor records disposition schedules of the service departments to ensure that important health and personnel records are protected and not destroyed prematurely. Recently separated military personnel are being provided with a CD or flash drive containing their records.

VB-18 The Department of Veterans Affairs' Voluntary Service (VAVS) Program: VVA encourages state councils and chapters to get involved with voluntary services at their local VA hospitals.

VB-19 Veterans Environmental Health Effects: Legislation that addresses VVA's initiative regarding the toxic exposure of all American veterans continues as new legislation is introduced once again in Congress: S.901 and H.R.1789. All veterans are encouraged to contact their congressional representatives to ensure that Congress passes this legislation that is vitally needed for our children.

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VB-20 Participation in the Process of Accrediting VA Medical Centers: Ongoing until resolved. VVA encourages its members to get involved at the local level in VA hospitals.

VB-27 Reduction of DIC Survivor Waiting Period: Under Section 1318, even if a cause of death is not service connected, a survivor can obtain Death and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) benefits if the veteran had been service connected for a condition that was totally disabling for a period of ten years. VVA continues to seek to reduce the ten-year period to one year.

VB-28 Removal of the 5 Percent Annual Deductible for VA Pension Eligibility: The committee continues to work with VVA Government Affairs staff to urge that all allowable medical expenses incurred by a low-income veteran eligible for a VA pension be subtracted from his or her household income, not just those expenses that exceed the 5 percent deductible. This will be included in our work on reducing the backlog, as the necessary calculations make this annual task more onerous on veterans and VA employees.

The Veterans Benefits Committee: Tom Burke, Chair; Joseph Jennings III, Vice Chair; Joe Kristek, Chair, Service Officer Grant Program Subcommittee; Rick Carman, Chair, Service Officer Grievance Subcommittee; Dick Southern, Chair, Rewrite Subcommittee. Members: Gene Crego, Ned Foote, Perry Melvin, Pete Peterson, John Riling, John Weiss, and Herb Worthington. Special Advisor: Nancy Switzer. AVVA Advisor: Pam Bossardet. VVA Staff Support: Jim Vale and Elaine Chaney.

Veterans Health Care

BY SANDIE WILSON, VICE CHAIR



The Veterans Health Care Committee is a coordinating committee that includes the chairs of other VVA standing committees, the Veterans Health Council,

and members interested in veterans' health issues. Whenever legislative action is needed to provide access, quality, and accountability for veterans' health care, VVA Government Affairs Department staff attend the Health Care Committee meetings.

In collaboration with VVA's Veterans Health Council, the committee plays a role in ensuring that VVA's human subjects research policy meets federal policy protections for those wanting to conduct research with our membership. It is also one of the committee's objectives to monitor health care and medical research for other generations of veterans and veteran families (e.g., Gulf War illness). This is certainly within the scope of our founding principle, "Never Again Will One Generation of Veterans Abandon Another."

Another goal of the committee is health education. This is accomplished in numerous ways. For example, several VVA committees have requested time at the upcoming VVA National Education & Leadership Conference to present veterans' health-related seminars. We also have developed pamphlets and fliers on veterans' health conditions related to toxic exposures during military service. These publications are designed to educate veterans sufficiently enough to ask the right questions of their health care providers.

In addition, the committee distributes the VA's "Military History" cards to health care providers to help them know what questions a veteran should be asked during a medical exam. We need your help to educate your health care provider that a veteran's health may differ as a result of military service.

As veterans grow older, our bodies and minds are experiencing more of the health consequences of our military service, so the committee also assists the Veterans Health Council in its health education efforts, including national broadcasts of seminars and webinars that focus on diseases and illnesses related to military service. They include bladder and prostate cancers, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide, and hepatitis C.

Lastly, we also monitor the quality and amount of care provided by the VA. But we need your help because you are the

consumer. Please report to the Veterans Health Care Committee whenever you experience problems with health care delivered at your local VA.

The Veterans Health Care Committee: Sandie Wilson, Vice Chair. Members: Tom Hall, Ph.D., Sandy Miller, Maynard Kaderlik, and Kate O'Hare-Palmer. AVVA Advisor: Sherry Wright-Anderson. Staff Support: Tom Berger, Ph.D., Bernie Edelman, and Rick Weidman.

Women Veterans

BY KATE O'HARE-PALMER, CHAIR



WV-2 Medical Treatment of Women Veterans by VA: The VA has made many innovations and improvements over the past thirty years, but concerns remain about its services to

women veterans. We have stressed that women must receive timely and geographically accessible care. Some improvement has been congressionally mandated in omnibus bill P.L.114-113. The VA Medical Services section includes expansion of the Choice Program, which addresses veteran health care needs in non-VA facilities in a more timely fashion. Despite the VA's efforts to decrease patient wait times, progress is uneven. To better understand why these geographic service gaps exist, the VA must report to Congress on the South Texas Veterans Health Care System, the Central Alabama Veterans Health Care System, the North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System, the Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System, and the VA Montana Health Care System. This bill fully funds gender-specific health care for FY2016 and FY2017.

WV-6 Women Veterans and Veterans Benefits: The new Veterans Benefits Administration agreement provides \$76.9 million for Compensation and Pensions. Of the amount provided, not more than \$15.6 million is to be transferred to general operating

expenses, VBA, and information technology systems for reimbursement of expenses in implementing provisions of Title 38. Advance appropriations have been authorized for FY2017. Women often encounter cultural roadblocks in a system that was largely designed to meet the needs of men. The agreement also directs the VA to continue the Women Veterans Call Center.

WV-7 Women Veteran Program Managers: Women veteran program managers are now assigned to each VA regional office. Every woman veteran can ask to be directed to these program managers when seeking assistance with claims. Every VA hospital should have a full-time women veteran program manager for its Women's Clinic. The compliance review is still incomplete.

WV-8 Military Sexual Trauma: DoD's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Report for FY2014 was released in January and is posted at Sapr.mil/public/docs/reports/FY14_Annual/FY14_DoD_SAPRO_Annual_Report_on_Sexual_Assault.pdf. The number of reported assaults was down. However, looking at the reports of those who said they received retaliation on the job or socially, or even a lowering of rank, one wonders how accurate those numbers are.

The report concluded that more effort is needed to educate new recruits about sexual harassment. Chain of command is still the ultimate judicial standard with concurrent blocks in equitable prosecution rates. The VA has been directed to increase mental health services to veterans who were victims of military sexual trauma and to report to Congress semiannually. Many women veterans go to Vet Centers rather than to a VA hospital. Vet Centers have been allocated \$258 million to address the unmet mental health needs of veterans in rural areas.

The Women Veterans Committee: Kate O'Hare-Palmer, Chair; Patti Dumin, Vice Chair. Members: Sandy Miller, Dottie Barickman, John Wallace, Tom Berger, Ph.D., Tom Hall, Ph.D., and Sara McVicker. Special Advisors: Lee Jackson, Beverly Stewart, Billee Culin, Linda Blankenship, and Jennifer Wilson. AVVA Advisors: Cecilia Essenmacher and Elayne Mackey. VVA Staff Support: Sharon Hodge. ■