



VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMISSION

Regular Meeting Minutes

February 8, 2024

Agenda ID # 240123

City of Dallas 1500 South Marilla Street 6 ES Dallas Texas

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Ronnie Mestas Presiding- Vice Chair Commissioner

PRESENT: [9]

Ronnie Mestas, District 6, Commissioner and Chair
Charles Ayers, District 1, Commissioner
Katina Robertson, District 3, Commissioner
Fred Walker, District 4, Commissioner
Gayland Sherman, District 5, Commissioner
Diane E. Birdwell, District 7, Commissioner
Scott Chase, District 11, Commissioner
Ray A Smith, District 13, Commissioner *
Peter Gray Smith, District 14, Commissioner *

ABSENT: [2]

Juan M. Preciado, District 2, Commissioner
Steven T. Ramos, District 9, Commissioner

**Note: Members of the Board/Commission participated in this meeting by video conference.*

***Note: Indicates arrival time after meeting called to order/reconvened*

AGENDA

I. Call to Order & Pledge of Allegiance

At about 12:03 pm Chair Mestas took Roll Call. There was quorum for the meeting to proceed. Chair Mestas began with the Pledge of Allegiance and a moment of silence for troops recently lost.

II. Public Comments on Items III – VI

There were no public comments.

III. Vote and Approve Meeting Minutes from January 11th, 2024

Commissioner Chase made a motion to approve the meeting minutes from January 11, 2024. Commissioner Dr. Ayers seconded. All were in favor. Motion was passed.

IV. Presentation by Combined Arms: Megan Heil (NTX Regional Manager), Krystle Kaszuba (NTX Outreach Coordinator), and Gus Cabaracas

Presentation slides were shared in advance and displayed for the commissioners during the presentation.

Krystle Kaszuba began. She introduced Megan Heil, the North Texas Regional Manager, who then presented.

Megan Heil stated that she will present on Combined Arms program, Texas Veterans Network. They are Headquartered in Houston. They are a partnership of 4 entities that work together to serve veterans: Texas Workforce Commission, Texas Veterans Commission, Texas Government Land Office, and Combined Arms.

Texas Veterans Network's focus is to ensure all of our veterans, the military community, their families, and caregivers are all taken care of in an efficient, coordinated manner. All their services are free because they are funded by the Texas government and privately.

They serve veterans, reservists, active duty, national guard, retirees, SIVs & Allies, and caregivers all throughout Texas. This summer of 2023 Texas overtook California as the state with the most veterans due to amazing resources for veterans, more than any other state.

The services they provide are liaising directly to over 300 vetted, service providers. Each organization must be a best-in-class service provider and meet eligibility requirements as well as track the service(s) and outcome.

Some of the main veteran services are veteran benefits, career services, volunteer opportunities, education resources, homeless services, mental wellness, physical wellness, financial resources, and legal services. They have streamlined the communication and collaboration process from the point of transition to their last breath.

Clients connect with them through their portal via a QR Code, or website: www.texasveterans.network = <https://www.combinedarms.us/tvn>, or phone (844)-4TX-VETS. The QR code & website open to an intake process where an online profile is created. There are 2 intake teams, one in Houston and the second in Arlington. They divide the state in half to process service calls. Once the 5-minute profile is completed an intake team representative, they are veterans or spouses and dependents of veterans, reaches out to them within 48-72 hours. On average 3-4 referrals are made per client.

Commissioner Peter Smith asked how Combined Arms separates their work from Texas Veterans Commission since both do the same work.

Megan- Texas Workforce Commission is the parent organization, and Texas Veterans Commission, Combined Arms, Government Land Office and the Veterans Land Board are all partners, they work together coordinating services.

Commissioner Ayers asked if the City of Dallas is one of their partners.

Megan replied yes. There are “community connectors” within the City of Dallas that can make referrals in Combined Arms system for client needs. An example is the City of Dallas’ Veteran Treatment Courts.

Commissioners further clarified that he asked about Dallas because Combined Arms has Ft Worth listed as a member organization, but not Dallas.

Megan explained that Ft Worth has a veteran specific financial assistance grant from Texas Veterans Commission.

Commissioner Chase asked if they rely on volunteers or paid staff?

Megan said they are all paid, full-time and part-time staff, and very busy. In January they answered 4,400 calls, not including the other communication through the internet.

Commissioner Chase then stated he is on the board of Senior Source, an organization that helps seniors pay bills. They are amenable to assisting veterans, so he would like to follow up to partner and collaborate.

Megan said they are always open to meet new partners. Last year there were over 650 organizations that said they serve veterans. They have their criteria for eligibility to partner, but yes, they are always happy to be introduced.

Chair Mestas commented that disability claims backlogs are a major issue. Does Combined Arms work on this?

Megan, yes. We have several partners with certified veteran benefits specialists to assist veterans for free. This protects veterans from predators and expedites their claims. The number one partner in the region is the Dallas County Veterans Service Office. They are timely and quality. Additionally, the Texas Veterans Commission benefits department and the Wounded Warrior Project have certified claims specialist. However, Wounded Warriors is for post 9-11 veterans only.

Commissioner Walker asked about the home repair services.

Megan- Texas Veterans Commission has an annual grant, healthy homes for heroes. Non-profits that provide that service apply for this grant. Furthermore, there are home modifications for ADA. Referrals are made to the vetted organizations that repair & renovate homes when that request is made.

Commissioner Chase asked when Combined Arms was founded?

Megan said it began in Houston in 2015. Then, in 2020 they won a grant to start the Texas Veterans Network. The onset of Covid posed a major challenge.

Commissioner Chase complimented the program. Then he asked if statewide coordination and tracking are an integral part of the program?

Megan- Yes. Seeing where the veteran populations are, what are the most requested needs, and what are the gaps in services. This data is essential in ensuring the grants that Texas Veterans Commissions awards are going to the right providers. We are now able to assist other states in duplicating our work, like Louisiana, South Carolina, Florida and Virginia through our system that is run and managed on Salesforce.

Commissioner Sherman asked how Dallas can get the grant that Ft Worth was awarded.

Megan- apply for that grant through Texas Veterans Commission. Leverage Dallas' Veteran Treatment Courts by connecting to the City applicant for that grant since they've gone through the process.

Commissioner Birdwell- the Veterans Treatment Courts was awarded the grant by TVC?
Megan- both the City and County of Dallas were awarded the Veteran Treatment Courts grant from TVC. Although a city applies for it, the County is the benefactor.

Chair Mestas asked is CA involved with JROTC or ROTC?

Megan- no. That is up to the parents. But we will work and volunteer with partners that are engaging students. Also, we work with veteran parents to help them ensure their children are getting benefits they are eligible for.

Presentation concluded.

V. Discussion on subcommittees

Chair Mestas began by asking for input on what subcommittees the commissioners suggest.

Commissioner Birdwell stated that housing and homelessness has been the focus. Later we can address education and jobs. We can have these on standby.

Commissioner Peter Smith recalled the other focuses of the commission: housing/homelessness, jobs, education, and healthcare. He suggested that a new subcommittee would need to be one of the remaining three.

Dr. Robertson said she doesn't have suggestions for additional subcommittees. However, she wants to add depth to housing & homelessness. She oversees a team called HART- Homeless Action Response Team. HART is in collaboration between the Office Homeless Solutions and Dallas Parks Recreation which maintains and addresses all 407 city parks and 187 miles of trails.

Recently she ran into a homeless veteran and wished she had the resource card. A possible suggestion would be to mobilize and go out to the streets to find homeless veterans and help them.

Chair Mestas added that identifying veterans among the homeless is a challenge because they hide and don't want to be seen. They avoid social interaction.

Commissioner Birdwell mentioned that the Bridge does a good job with housing. Also, there are issues with addictions and mental illness. We should ask the City for us to coordinate efforts with homeless shelters and others by holding a publicity campaign.

Dr. Robertson agreed to that as being a great idea. Therefore, instead of stretching our bandwidth by adding new subcommittees we can add quality to what we currently have in place.

Commissioner Sherman said he's worked on the US Census Bureau and many residents don't answer the door. There is a list of questions that are asked to the resident, but if they don't answer the door or complete the questions the information will be incomplete.

Commissioner Birdwell suggested tabling the subcommittees for another time. Till then, each commissioner should think about what subcommittee you would like to be a part of.

Commissioner Ayers made a motion to table this discussion till the next meeting. Commissioner Birdwell seconded it. All were in favor, and no one objected.

VI. Announcements

Commissioner Chase brought up the resource card and Combined Arms remarking that they are not on it.

Shpendim stated the veteran serving resources project which will be on next month's agenda. This is part of the process to update the VAC website with veteran serving organizations, as well as the resource card.

Shpendim remarked about his experience with Housing Forwards Point in Time count. During the meeting leadership stressed that the process is an approximation, and in no way complete. He supported Dr. Robertson's advice to add depth and quality and suggested utilizing HART as a partner.

Commissioner Sherman said he's a member of the Disabled Veterans Organization and in April they will have a training for veterans on the benefits claim process.

VII. Adjournment

Commissioner Ayers motioned to adjourn the meeting. Commissioner Birdwell seconded it. Chair Mestas adjourned the meeting at 1:00pm.

Drafted by:

Shpendim Nadzaku, Welcoming Coordinator
WCIA / OEI

Date

Approved by:

Ronnie Lee Mestas, Chair
Veteran's Affairs Commission

Date

Attachments:

Transcript Link and or Video Link

<https://dallascityhall.webex.com/webappng/sites/dallascityhall/recording/f473fe43a8d9103cb6bdd65217919eff/playback>