



# **TEXAS VETERANS COMMISSION**

**Veteran Affairs and Military Installations**

**Committee Hearing**

**May 12, 2010**

**Agency Overview and**

**Response to Interim Charges # 4, 5 and 6**

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## **I. SUMMARY OF AGENCY SERVICES**

### **A. Agency Overview**

As the veterans' advocacy agency for the state of Texas the mission of the Texas Veterans Commission is to provide superior service through the agency programs of Claims Representation and Counseling, Veterans Employment Services, Veterans Education and the Fund for Veterans Assistance. Each program is designed to interact with the other to significantly improve the quality of life for Texas Veterans and their families. This relationship remains dynamic and ongoing throughout the course of the veterans life and, in many cases, beyond through death and pension benefits.

Texas Veterans Commission is a five-member Commission whose Commissioners serve staggered 6 year terms and are appointed by the Governor. The Governor also selects the Commission's Chair. Texas Veterans Commission currently has 4 members.

Chair - Karen Rankin, BGen, USAF (Ret), of San Antonio

Vice Chair - T.P. O'Mahoney of Dallas

Secretary - Eliseo "Al" Cantu of Corpus Christi

Member - John McKinney of El Paso

Member – VACANT, Vacated by the death of Ezell Ware Jr., BGen, USA (Ret)

Texas is nationally recognized for having one agency administer all three veterans' program areas. In every way, the delivery of services to our State's veterans is enhanced because of the synergy created by the addition of the Veterans Employment Services and the Veterans Education Programs to the Texas Veterans Commission. The added value to veterans by having the services of the three programs in one agency is significant.

#### **1. Veterans Claims Representation and Counseling Services**

The Claims Representation and Counseling Services program provides veterans, their dependents and survivors assistance in obtaining all earned benefits and entitlements from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. This assistance is directed toward ensuring that all Texas veterans receive every benefit to which they are entitled; and, as a corollary benefit, increase the federal payments to Texas veterans and their survivors, thereby benefiting the economy of the State of Texas.

Counseling is conducted in field offices throughout the State, which are manned by trained veterans' assistance counselors. TVC counselors assist veterans and their families throughout every phase of the claims process. This process includes educating veterans about the benefits for which they qualify, the initial filing of a claim, compiling additional evidence or documentation required by VA, appealing a VA decision, and if necessary, providing representation at a VA hearing.

In addition to these offices, all Texas counties with a population greater than 200,000 are legislatively mandated to maintain Veterans' County Service Offices. Smaller counties may choose to maintain such offices. The Veteran County Service Officers who run these offices are trained and supported by TVC.

## 2. Veterans Employment Services

The Texas Veterans Commission offers employment services to Texas veterans and helps employers find qualified veteran job applicants. The goal of these services is to match veteran job seekers with the best career opportunities available.

Texas leads the nation in veterans' employment with Texas Veterans Commission employment representatives helping more than 47,500 veterans find employment in 2009. Additionally, the Texas Veterans Commission staff has filled over 500 training slots at the prestigious National Veterans' Training Institute since 2006 and won 12 national employment awards from both veteran and workforce organizations in 2008 and 2009.

### *Job Seekers*

Over 90 Texas Veterans Commission employment representatives provide a full range of career services. They are located in more than 75 cities throughout Texas and offer one-on-one assistance to veterans with job applications, resume preparation, job matching and searches, as well as other intensive services.

The Texas Veterans Commission also provides intensive services to disabled veterans, economically or educationally disadvantaged veterans, and veterans with other barriers to employment, especially homeless veterans.

### *Employers*

In 2009 the Texas Veterans Commission launched an initiative to enhance and centralize services to employers. The Texas Veterans Commission's Business Outreach Coordinator works with employers to help them understand the value of hiring qualified veterans who possess numerous unique abilities gained through military service veterans. Additionally, the Texas Veterans Commission provides employers with qualified, pre-screened veteran candidates for career opportunities. This service is provided at no cost to the employer.

### *Transition Assistance Program*

Transition Assistance Program (TAP) briefings are provided to National Guard, Reserve and regular military personnel preparing to leave military service. The TAP workshops, which last two to three days, provide information on VA benefits, job search techniques, interviewing skills, translation of military duties into civilian job skills, resume preparation and labor market information. The TAP workshops are conducted an average of 17 times per month at 13 military installations statewide.

### *Family Career Assistance Counselors*

In September 2009, TVC began providing employment services to spouses and caregivers of active duty servicemembers. Family Career Assistance Counselors are placed at Fort Hood, Fort Bliss and Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio and provide the same services to those spouses and caregivers as they do to veterans.

### *Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E)*

TVC assigns staff to designated VA facilities to assist disabled veterans with intensive employment assistance. These services are provide to veterans completing their VR&E training or education program and are within 90 days of graduation.

### **3. Veterans Education**

The Veterans Education program staff assists Texas veterans and dependents with questions and concerns regarding their eligibility for or difficulties obtaining any of the federal G.I. Bill benefits or the Texas Hazelwood Act benefit. Texas Veteran Commission Education staff responds to more than five hundred (500) Hazelwood Act requests for information each month.

As the State Approving Agency for federal veterans' educational benefits, Texas Veterans Commission Veterans Education program determines those programs of education and training within the state which may be approved for veterans training and funding. TVC approves all programs for Chapter 30 (Active Duty), Chapter 32 (Post Vietnam Veterans' Educational Assistance Program or VEAP), Chapter 35 (Dependents' Educational Assistance Program), 1606 (Selected Reserve), and Chapter 1607 (Reserve Educational Assistance Program or REAP) educational benefits.

Through an approval process, TVC ensures that institutions and employers are in compliance with federal guidelines and are qualified to provide the type of training offered. TVC also continues to monitor approved programs by conducting annual on-site visits to all facilities that have veterans receiving benefits. This process is used to determine if schools and employers are enforcing and abiding by the approved policies and procedures and if veterans are being certified for benefits correctly.

### **4. Texas Veterans Commission Fund for Veterans' Assistance**

The Texas Veterans Commission Fund for Veterans' Assistance was created by the 80th Texas Legislature in 2007 to provide aid to veterans and their families in need. The fund is supported by generous donations from individuals and organizations. Additionally, a lottery scratch-off game was created during the 81<sup>st</sup> Legislative Session to provide a secure revenue stream for the fund.

The Texas Veterans Commission Fund for Veterans' Assistance makes grants to address a broad range of needs for both veterans and their families, as well as grants to improve veterans' assistance programs. Qualified charitable organizations, Veterans Service Organizations and local government agencies will receive grants to provide direct assistance to veterans and their families in local communities.

## **B. Statewide Impact**

It is of special note that the activities of the Texas Veterans Commission have a direct and positive economic impact to the State of Texas. Because of the large population of veterans and their families, assistance to them reflects positively on the entire State population as measured in the following statewide benchmarks:

- Per capita gross state product,
- Unemployment rate,
- Median household income and
- Number of Texans receiving job training services.

Texas veterans received the same amount of compensation as the average amount paid

to veterans in the six other most populous states listed in the Table below, the Federal VA payments received by Texas veterans would be two billion dollars less than the amount currently paid. Texas Veterans Commission programs generate a recovery of hundreds of millions of federal dollars in payments to Texas veterans and their families. In Fiscal Year 2010, payments to the 167,000+ veterans and survivors whom the Commission represents before Veterans Administration will total more than \$2 billion. By increasing the number of veterans seen by Texas Veterans Commission personnel a mere 5% through marketing and outreach efforts the impact is an additional one hundred million dollars fed directly into the State of Texas economy.

<b>Seven Most Populous States Federal Fiscal Year 2009</b>					
STATE	VETERAN POPULATION	VETERANS RECEIVING COMPENSATION OR PENSION	COMPENSATION & PENSION EXPENDITURES (\$000)	PER CAPITA COMPENSATION & PENSION PAYMENT <sup>1</sup>	COMPENSATION & PENSION RECIPIENTS PER 1,000 VETERANS
Texas	1,701,675	330,292	\$4,188,343	\$2,461	194.10
Florida	1,683,899	292,787	\$3,476,355	\$2,064	173.87
California	2,025,934	305,570	\$3,472,898	\$1,714	150.83
New York	988,217	142,265	\$1,563,618	\$1,582	143.96
Ohio	913,296	122,820	\$1,343,327	\$1,471	134.48
Pennsylvania	995,315	129,389	\$1,483,207	\$1,490	130.00
Illinois	802,834	87,678	\$980,149	\$1,221	109.21

<sup>1</sup> per capita: Compensation and pension payments / veteran population)  
Source: US Department of Veterans Affairs: [Veterans Benefits Administration Office of Performance Analysis and Integrity](#)

## II. CHARGE #4 - SPECIFIC NEEDS OF FEMALE VETERANS

### A. Texas Specific Women Veteran Issues

The State of Texas is currently home to 152, 571 women veterans. While the federal government has passed legislation authorizing certain specific programs and services for

women veterans, the data provided below illustrates the underutilization of those services within the state of Texas.

The Texas Veterans Commission identifies the merit in establishing a position for a statewide Women Veterans Coordinator. This Women Veterans Coordinator would direct statewide efforts and resources to ensure that the women veterans of this state have equitable access to federal and state veterans' benefits and services.

Among the most important functions of a statewide Women Veterans Coordinator would be to provide assistance to women veterans and perform outreach functions to improve the awareness of women veterans of their eligibility for federal and state veterans' benefits and services. This position would also assess the needs of women veterans with respect to benefits and services and review programs and research projects making recommendations regarding the improvement of benefits and services to women veterans.

During the 81st Legislative session, Senator Zaffirini introduced Senate Bill 2256 which sought to establish a Texas Women Veterans Coordinator within Texas Veterans Commission which was supported by Texas Veterans Service Organizations.

The information that follows provides an overview of the federal legislation and public laws that have created or impacted services and programs affecting women veterans benefits, an outline of the Women's Veteran Health Program as one example, and data that highlights the underutilization of those programs in Texas.

## **B. Federal Legislation and Public Laws Regarding Women Veterans**

The following information provides an overview of the legislation and Public Laws that govern the U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) in their administration of the Women Veterans Health Program within the Veterans Health Administration (VHA).

**Public Law (Pub. L ) 102-585**, Veterans Health Care Act of **1992**, Title I, enacted November 4, 1992, authorized the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to provide gender-specific services, such as Papanicolaou tests (Pap smears), breast examinations, management of menopause, mammography, and general reproductive health care services to eligible women veterans. In addition, this law authorizes VA to provide women veterans counseling services needed to treat sexual trauma experienced while on serving on active duty.

**(Pub. L.) 103-452**, Veterans Health Programs extension Act of **1994**, signed November 2, 1994, authorizes VA to provide appropriate care and services for sexual trauma. The law also made VA's authority to treat sexual trauma **gender-neutral**

**(Pub. L.) 104-262**, Veterans' Health Care Eligibility Reform Act of **1996**, required VA to establish and implement a national enrollment system. Maternity and infertility services, excluding in-vitro fertilization (IVF), are included in VA's medical benefits package.

**(Pub. L.) 106-117**, Veterans Millennium Health Care and Benefits Act, signed November 30, 1999, extends VA's authority to provide counseling and treatment for sexual trauma.

**(Pub. L.) 108-422**, extends VA's authority permanently (without an expiration date) and extends MST counseling and related treatment to active duty for training (ADUTRA) service members.

### C. Women Veterans Health Program

The following information provides an overview of the services provided to female veterans within the Veteran Health Administration (VHA). These services and procedures are considered Primary Health Care.

1. Pelvic Examination
2. Breast Examination
3. A Pap Smear
4. Basic Gender-specific Care
  - (a) All VA health care facilities must provide gender-specific and gynecologic services to eligible women veterans.
  - (b) Gender-specific services must include:
    - (1) Gynecology
    - (2) Maternity –**VA is authorized to provide prenatal and postpartum care to eligible women veterans. At the present time, such care is best provided through contractual arrangements. VA is not authorized to provide newborn services, so it is essential that the mother be advised to make alternative arrangements for newborn care prior to delivery.**
    - (3) Infertility
    - (4) Mental Health
    - (5) Osteoporosis
    - (6) Endocrinology-treatment of polycystic ovarian syndrome
    - (7) Oncology (surgical and medical oncology (breast and reproductive))
    - (8) Counseling and Treatment for Sexual Trauma

### D. Utilization of Services in Texas

The following data provides some examples of the utilization of women veteran services within the state of Texas’ three (3) Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISN 16, 17, & 18), utilizing data obtained from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, VHA Support Service Center, for FY 2009.

The following are sample lists of conditions that Women Veterans have been treated for at VA Facilities in Texas.

#### VISN 16 Conroe CBOC

Endometriosis	<b>6</b>
Polycystic Ovaries	<b>5</b>
Pregnant	<b>2</b>
Lump or Mass of Breast	<b>3</b>
Genital Herpes	<b>9</b>

#### VISN 16 Galveston CBOC

Malignant Tissue Breast	<b>3</b>
Pap Smears	<b>6</b>
Lump or Mass of Breast	<b>5</b>
Osteoporosis	<b>11</b>
Pregnant	<b>1</b>

#### VISN 17 Dallas VAMC

Osteoporosis	<b>278</b>
Lump or Mass of Breast	<b>162</b>
Hormone Replacement	<b>90</b>
Carcinoma of Cervix	<b>9</b>
Abnormal Mammogram	<b>247</b>

#### VISN 17 San Antonio VAMC

Polycystic Ovaries	<b>37</b>
Pap Smears	<b>91</b>
Infertility	<b>31</b>
Malignant Tissue Breast	<b>123</b>
Pregnant	<b>99</b>

#### VISN 18 Amarillo HCS

#### VISN 18 El Paso HCS



Malignant Tissue Breast	<b>53</b>
Solitary cyst of Breast	<b>8</b>
Postmenopausal bleeding	<b>8</b>
Osteoporosis	<b>129</b>
Mammogram	<b>84</b>

Osteoporosis	<b>121</b>
Infertility	<b>25</b>
Mucous polyp of cervix	<b>12</b>
Anemia	<b>133</b>
Urinary Tract Infection	<b>198</b>

The following table provides information on the total number of Women Veterans who have received treatment at any VA facility in Texas by VISN area. Each female veteran counted among these figures is a unique patient, meaning a single female veteran receiving multiple treatments or procedures has only been counted once.

### Total # of Women Veterans seen at Texas VA Facility by VISN

VISN 16 (Houston Area)	<b>10577</b>
VISN 17 (Dallas, San Antonio, Temple, Waco, Austin)	<b>47008</b>
VISN 18 (El Paso, Amarillo, Lubbock, Big Spring)	<b>9987</b>

The following table provides information on the total number of Women Veterans who have received treatment for sexual trauma at any VA facility in Texas by VISN area.

### Sexual Trauma Cases by VISN

VISN 16	<b>5</b>
VISN 17	<b>86</b>
VISN 18	<b>129</b>

### III. CHARGE #5 – TRAINING FOR VETERANS COUNTY SERVICE OFFICERS

Veterans’ County Service Officers (VCSO) and assistants are appointed by the county commissioners’ courts. Texas Veterans Commission is responsible for the training of veterans’ county service officers and assistants. Texas Veterans Commission hosts two,

semi-annual, statewide training conferences in the spring and fall of each calendar year. Newly appointed VCSOs are encouraged to complete an initial training class while more experienced VCSOs take part in refresher courses, both instructed by Texas Veterans Commission Claims Counselors.

In Fiscal Year 1996, Texas Veterans Commission undertook a program of advanced certification of VCSO's and assistants. The advanced certification, which is voluntary, is called "accreditation" and is governed by federal and state regulation to recognize those VCSOs who complete an advanced program of training and mentoring approved by VA. The Texas Veterans Commission's program includes mentoring, one-on-one instruction by senior counselors, classroom training, training at Texas Veterans Commission regional and field offices and testing. Currently, there are forty-six (46) VCSOs that have completed the training and passed the examination and there are ten (10) pending certification. All of these will earn the title of "Accredited Representative of the Texas Veterans Commission." This allows the VCSO the opportunity to represent veterans at VA hearings and gives them full access to the VA files of veterans who have named TVC as their representative in a claim.

Although training requirements have been mandated, the current requirement of 12 hours per year is not adequate to maintain professional standards. Of the 250 veterans county service officers and assistants who require training, 229 participated in training during the last calendar year. Additional training requirements would allow for a more thoroughly prepared force of VCSO's and provide a higher quality of service to Texas veterans.

#### **IV. CHARGE #6 - ADVANTAGE OF CENTRALIZING CALL CENTER ACTIVITIES**

An initiative is underway within the Texas Veterans Commission to integrate the three program areas which includes leveraging technology to develop an automatic referral system/procedure between the programs and a synthesizing of the marketing efforts. A key component to this effort would be the utilization of the customer relationship management technology combined with an in-bound call center and create a functional

relationship at the initial point of contact. With the appropriate elements in place, combined with effective training, the delineation between the program areas would be seamless, the relationship with the client/constituent more profound and the benefit to the state substantial.

Plans were derailed due to the loss of the Texas Veterans Commission's call center as a result of a Sunset Commission recommendation. Texas Veterans Commission now lacks the ability to provide the desired heightened level of service to its constituents.

Currently, there are two referral services through which Texas Veterans Commission receives calls, the Texas Veterans Land Board call center and 211, both of which are external to agency operations. Texas Veterans Commission sees that there is potential to integrate the universal 211 system into the agency's overall strategy. That potential depends heavily upon Texas Veterans Commission and the 211 system developing a coordinated effort as required by S.B. 1058, 80<sup>th</sup> Legislature. That bill required the 211 systems to provide referrals for reintegration services to veterans and their families. Configuring and integrating these resources to the best advantage of veterans needs significant work. For example, there is currently only one (1) 211 center that has staff dedicated to veterans assistance. 211 could more clearly inform veterans of specific services available. At a minimum, in the opening call menu, there should be a distinct option that refers veterans to a specially trained 211 operator for veterans. Texas Veterans Commission desires to capitalize on the opportunity that exists with 211. Texas Veterans Commission believes that by complying with SB 1058 the agency's services can be integrated into the 211 referral system.