



Washington State Legislature

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Joint Committee on Veterans' and Military Affairs

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Meeting Minutes -- September 17, 2014, Camp Murray, Tacoma, WA

Members present: Appleton, Bailey, Conway, Klippert, McCoy, Muri, O'Ban, Orwall, Roach, Rolfes

Members absent: Braun, Green, Hayes, Hobbs, MacEwen, Morrell

Senator Conway called the meeting to order at 1:37 p.m.

Presentation on Proposed Homeless Veteran Program at Western State Hospital

Larry Geringer, Phil Sawyer, and Denny Sapp, representing the Resource Center at the Tacoma Rescue Mission, briefed the Committee on a proposal to provide emergency housing for homeless veterans. Currently, there is a gap in emergency housing and assistance for homeless veterans. The number of homeless veterans is a growing concern, as veterans are frequently housed with the general homeless population -- a situation that is not ideal. Veterans with PTSD don't want to be in large crowds and would prefer to be with other veterans.

Mr. Geringer, Mr. Sawyer, and Mr. Sapp want to create a program run by veterans, for veterans that provides case management and direction. Building 26 at Western State Hospital would be the site of this program. It has been vacant for five years; previously, it was used by DOC as a pre-release facility, and it is ready for use. The program's proponents have done two walkthroughs of the facility and understand what needs to be done. The model for the program is Building 9 at Retsil, but that has a two-year program; this program would provide up to 90 days of assistance.

The program would provide three different levels of emergency assistance. Services would include screening for PTSD, suicidality, and drug use, providing emergency housing, and enrollment in VA services at American Lake. Building 26 has the advantage of being close to services veterans need. Veterans can use their military training and skills to assist in program operations. Mr. Geringer, Mr. Sawyer, and Mr. Sapp state that additional advocates and sponsors are needed to champion the program.

In response to a question from Representative Orwall, Mr. Geringer stated that the program would not be a domiciliary program. The program would house veterans until they qualify for the domiciliary program at American Lake; that process can take from two weeks to ten months. The program would be operated by Tacoma Rescue Mission unless an agency stepped in.

In response to a question from Representative Klippert, Mr. Geringer stated that the program would cost \$300,000 annually for salaries, and \$300,000 to \$600,000 for operating costs. The advocates could move in to Building 26 with an investment of \$1,000,000, and only need to make upgrades for ADA compliance.

The committee approved the minutes from the October 17, 2013, November 18, 2013, and April 30, 2014 meetings.

Update on Federal VA Health Care Facilities

Michael Murphy, director of the Puget Sound Veterans Health Care System, updated the Committee on developments at federal VA health care facilities. The Office of the Inspector General's criminal division looked at the Puget Sound VA facility at American Lake and found nothing wrong with scheduling practices. There is an antiquated, complicated, scheduling system, and the Puget Sound network has seen the highest rate of growth of any system in the nation over the last 10 years. Senator Conway asked if the growth was anticipated, and Mr. Murphy responded that some of the growth was geographically driven, but is hard to predict.

The American Lake wait list peaked in April or May. Most of the wait list now currently involves home-based programs, but Mr. Murphy stressed that veterans are not going without care. Most waits are in primary care at American Lake due to provider shortages; 5 primary care providers have left in the last 12 or 14 months, and it can take up to 12 months to replace a provider. Physicians are not used on contract. The primary care wait time has been reduced because volunteers have helped out and hours have been extended; 88% of appointments are scheduled within 30 days.

Projections are that \$93 million will be spent by the VA on non-VA civilian care. Many of those on VA waitlists cannot statutorily receive civilian care. The VA routinely uses outside care when it makes sense for some procedures, such as mammograms.

Senator Rolfes asked what solutions were in place for Kitsap County veterans with the Bremerton Naval Hospital closing. Senator Conway asked if the federal government plans for population growth. Mr. Murphy responded that there is a module used for macro-level planning, but demographic shifts are more difficult to predict. Senator Bailey asked about inspection of contract facilities. Mr. Murphy stated that there is external oversight through a Joint Commission, and myriad internal inspections.

Mr. Murphy stated that the VA is contracting with the Joint Commission to do external audits of wait list and scheduling issues at VA facilities. This is the third round of audits.

Adjutant General Maj. Gen. Bret Daugherty introduced the next two presentations and welcomed the Committee to Camp Murray.

Update on the Washington National Guard Emergency Response to the SR 530 Mudslide and Forest Wildfires

Lt. Col. Clayton E. Braun provided the Committee with an update on emergency responses to the SR 530 mudslide and summer wildfires. The National Guard virtually always responds to a

request from a civil authority for emergency relief. There are 8,000 soldiers and airmen ready to perform any task, given time and resources. The costs for utilizing National Guard services are reimbursable. The National Guard can assist with law enforcement operations, but tries not to do so.

The National Guard responded for approximately six weeks on the SR 530 mudslide, comprising between 50 and 100 percent of response forces. Thirteen days after the incident, the National Guard reached peak involvement, with about 390 members engaged in various tasks. All told, about 700 National Guard members responded in some form to the mudslide. Senator Bailey asked if grief counseling was provided. Lt. Col. Braun responded that immediate counseling and exit counseling were provided, with Guard members periodically leaving the site. This was based on a model developed from the Iraq war. The cost for Guard services in the mudslide response was \$1.8 million, compared to approximately \$70 million in overall state costs.

Lt. Col. Braun stated that the 2014 wildfires were the largest in state history, necessitating the first mobilization of the National Guard to assist DNR in wildfire response since 1994. By the end of the response, approximately 800 National Guard members had gone on state active duty to support the mission. The cost for National Guard services in wildfire response was approximately \$8 million, compared to an estimated \$170 million in overall state costs.

Senator Conway stated that more needs to be done to protect woodland communities. Senator McCoy stated that the Legislature needs to take a hard look at emergency response structures. Senator Rolfes asked how requests for National Guard support work. Lt. Col. Braun stated that the National Guard worked with DNR and the Governor's office to pre-draft an emergency declaration, allowing the National Guard to be called in. This is the preferred model. In response to a question from Senator Bailey, Lt. Col. Braun stated that FEMA is only brought in when the local authority determines that it is necessary to do so.

Washington Youth Academy

Larry Pierce, director, Mike Mittleider, deputy director, and cadets Beverly Johnson and Kyle Meldahl briefed the Committee on the Washington Youth Academy (WYA). The WYA gives cadets 8 high school credits over a 22-week program. The WYA is becoming increasingly selective: there were 411 applicants for the most recent class. Approximately 45 cadets receive CERT training each class cycle. WYA class composition has begun to change over the last couple of years: where classes were previously about 50% Caucasian, recent classes have been plurality Hispanic.

The lack of a move-in-ready facility has caused the National Guard to reject federal money for WYA expansion. WYA is looking to participate in a federal pilot program to take cadets with non-violent juvenile convictions. Only states participating in the Youth Challenge program are eligible to participate in this pilot program.

In response to a question from Representative Orwall, Mr. Pierce stated that WYA staff look at need-based factors, the youth's interview, and commitment to the program when making admissions decisions.

Due to time constraints, the Committee and presenters agreed to move the update on the military sector economy and base realignment and closure to the next meeting.

The Committee discussed additional potential agenda items for the next meeting, tentatively scheduled to be held in December. Subjects include discussion of draft bills and reaction from stakeholder groups, a discussion of potential tour sites for the NCSL conference in Seattle next summer, and presentations from interested stakeholders on priority legislation.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:58 p.m.