

MINUTES
UNITED TENNESSEE VETERANS ASSOCIATION (UTVA)
Legislative Plaza, Room 31 Nashville, Tennessee **March 3, 2016**

UTVA information available at

<http://tn.gov/veteran/topic/united-tennessee-veterans-association-utva>

Speakers

John Ragan Chairman of Veteran Caucus
Edna MacDonald Director of Nashville Regional Benefit Office

UTVA Members Present

James Patterson American Legion
Mary Lee Fielder American Ex-Prisoners of War
Frank Forbes Disabled American Veterans
Tim Coop Wounded Warrior Project

TDVS Executive Members Present

Many-Bears Grinder Commissioner
Mark Breece Deputy Commissioner
Yvette Martinez Assistant Commissioner, Outreach & Communications
Travis Murphy Assistant Commissioner, Appeals and Middle Region
John Waddell Chief Legislative Officer

I. Call to Order

Commissioner Many-Bears Grinder took roll and called quorum.

I. Invocation

Assistant Commissioner Yvette Martinez led the invocation.

II. Pledge of Allegiance

Assistant Commissioner Travis Murphy led the pledge.

III. Presentation of Agenda

Commissioner Grinder reviewed the meeting agenda in opening.

IV. Approval of Minutes

There was a motion to accept the minutes from the December 2015 UTVA meeting. Minutes were approved.

V. Briefings:

Commissioner invited Representative John Ragan to begin his comments. Representative Ragan is Chair of the Veterans Caucus, and Representative of Anderson County. He briefed on bills that affect veterans this year. Bills discussed are as follows:

- Legislation introduced to provide funding to TN National Guard in order for them to be able to protect troops in state, in response to Chattanooga attack. Funding from budget surplus used to address vulnerabilities brought up by Chattanooga terrorist attack. Bill has been passed to allow National Guard personnel to be armed at National Guard facilities.
- Fallen Heroes Medal Bill introduced. It currently allows Tennessee to recognize service members who fell on foreign soil. The change extends the recognition to any service members killed on Tennessee soil.
- Bill written up to give service members who work for the State four years towards retirement because of their specified wartime service to our country.
- Property tax relief bill for disabled veterans reintroduced – Last year, it was determined that they would not be able to fund those benefits.

In closing, Representative Ragan encouraged UTVA members and meeting attendees to reach out to him if they ever needed help.

Commissioner Grinder thanked Representative Ragan and introduced John Waddell, Tennessee Department of Veterans Services Chief Legislative Officer.

John Waddell expounded on Representative Ragan's briefing. Points he focused on as follows:

- Higher Education for Veterans and Families: Multiple bills addressing instate tuition rates. Bills filed to extend instate tuition to family members of service members killed by terrorist attacks within United States, even if family member is not permanent resident of Tennessee.
- Bill introduced, indefinitely, to extend the period of time Veteran has to enroll in Education benefits in order to receive instate tuition.
- Legislation filed to determine how THEC constitutes a campus being Veteran friendly and what campuses can earn.
- Legislation filed to expand who is eligible to acquire Veteran related license plates, expanding who is eligible for which ones, eligibility is subject to change. License plate bill not usually “set” until end of year.
- Handgun carry permit for Veterans – in 2016, allow veterans who have been discharged in the last five years to file for handgun carry permit and not take the training courses; time saver and cost saver.
- Reduction in Hall income tax rate. Reduce amount a disabled Veteran would have to pay in taxes on investments.
- Tennessee Department of Veteran Services introduced a bill to establish practices for conceivable future of State Veterans Cemeteries. Right now, cemeteries change operations’ depending who is the Commissioner. The quality of care should not change with who is in the position, bill addresses that.
- Representative Pitts asked him to distribute statement on property tax issue regarding his legislation.
- On TN General Assembly website, type in Veteran and it will take you to Veteran page where legislation concerning veterans can be viewed.

Commissioner Grinder thanked John Waddell for briefing and introduced Director Edna MacDonald of the VA Nashville Regional Benefits Office.

Edna MacDonald, Director of Veterans Affairs Benefits, gave briefing on progress made by VA on a national level and state level.

- Director MacDonald's briefing is attached.

Commissioner Many-Bears Grinder thanked Director MacDonald and then began briefing on a few topics:

- Dream Foundation to the UTVA members and meeting attendees.
 - See attachment.
- Opening of the Brigadier General Wendell H. Gilbert State Veterans Home in Clarksville, January 2016.
 - There are still VA and Medicare surveys that need to be passed before Clarksville home can accept residents with related reimbursements.
 - Ensures safety of the Veteran.
 - Invited everyone to go and visit when they can.
 - No questions were asked
- Recent visit to Washington she got to hear Secretary of the VA McDonald speak:
 - VA wants to move from a "rules based organization" to a "principles based organization".
 - Major priority is extending the time that Veterans are able to live at home
 - Aid and Attendance being invested in
 - Improvement of the Veteran experience a priority
 - In many instances, Veterans get medical care but not a positive patient experience.
- Joshua Chamberlain Society.
 - See attachment.

Commissioner Grinder recognized Vietnam Veterans in room. March 29th is Vietnam Veterans Day.

Introduced Deputy Commissioner Mark Breece. Deputy Commissioner Breece gave update on state veteran cemeteries. Overview of projects, starting in the West and moving to the East:

- Memphis State Veterans Cemetery- busiest with over 1,000 internments each year. Notified UTVA of the request of expansion grant, and what Department of Veterans Services is doing with the received funds from the grant. Developments include installment of over 7,000 concrete preplaced crypts, paving, and installation of a columbarium with over 900 niches. Will be surveying a few sections where they can bury cremated remains in-ground. An irrigation system will be improved and expanded upon. Completion of projects estimated fall of 2016.
- Parker's Crossroads - USVA grant opportunity for a new \$6 million Veteran Cemetery there. Working with architects at this time, goal is new cemetery would be operable fall of 2017 and would serve enhance service to Veterans in 18 counties.
- Middle Tennessee State Veterans Cemetery- Grant opportunity fall of 2016, grant approval of 4.6 million dollar for installation of over 3000 preplaced crypts and installation of columbarium with over 600 niches. Will be surveying a few plots to install in-ground burial sites for cremated remains.
- New cemetery director of East Tennessee's state Veterans Cemetery, Mr. Kevin Knowles, will be replacing Mr. William Griffith upon his retirement in March.

Commissioner Grinder thanked Deputy Commissioner Mark Breece and acknowledged his hard work alongside their Federal partners at National Cemetery Administration. Tennessee is one of five states receiving grants for new cemeteries this year and is one of ten states receiving grants for cemetery improvement. Grants mean that we do not need to use state dollars for these improvements. Commissioner Grinder introduced Assistant Commissioner Yvette Martinez to

discuss Veteran Education.

Assistant Commissioner Martinez discussed how Veteran Education Task Force researched and determined what ways the State of Tennessee can improve upon Veterans Education.

- Veteran Education page of Annual Report shows the total number of veterans enrolled in Tennessee higher education institutions. Pointed out the progress from fiscal year 2013, growth in educational benefits being used
- Tennessee Veteran Higher Education Catalog was distributed- Catalog acts as a quick resource to direct Veterans beginning to look at higher education options.
- Student Veteran Education Coordinator (VEC) position has been created in three regions of the State after the reorganization of TDVS. UM in West and UT in East have been hired for. Process to recruit for Middle TN about to begin
 - Recognized there is a disconnect between campuses and Veterans
 - They know they need to better understand/help/serve/recruit student veterans, this VEC's position will help them fill those gaps
 - Act as consultant for the campuses on how to better serve Veterans on campus. VEC's will reach out to each campus, how we can help serve, organize Veteran Education Academies, regionally organize student veteran organization summits, establish and mentor student veteran organizations
- Veteran Education Academy –
 - cohosted at Austin Peay University last March with Drive to 55 and Tennessee Higher Education Committee
 - This year they will be held regionally

- Student Veteran Organization summit was cohosted this past year as well, determined their need and desire to improve upon networking
- Veteran Education Website-
www.tn.gov/veteran/section/veteran-education
 - Noted that not every veteran has VA education benefits. Under Governor Haslam's' TN Reconnect and TN Promise program veterans can attend Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology (TCAT) for free, see attachment.

Commissioner Grinder thanked Assistant Commissioner Martinez for all of her hard work, especially in spearheading the Veteran Education initiative. Commissioner Grinder introduced Assistant Commissioner Murphy.

Assistant Commissioner Murphy briefed on State's 2015-2016 fiscal year:

- Submitted just over 5800 claims
- Department of Veterans Services reorganized to focus on appeals and work hand-in-hand with VA.
- Represented Veterans in 134 hearings with Board of Veteran Appeals
- Represented folks in over 326 issues that they've had on appeal
- Tennessee piloting Digits to Digits- electronic transmission of claims from states claims management system to VA claims management system. Transmissions have increased. In February, over 100 successful submissions.

Commissioner Grinder thanked Assistant Commissioner Murphy for his briefing on the Appeals Division of the Department of Veterans Services. No questions were asked. No unfinished business was introduced. No new business was introduced. Dates of future meetings posted on TDVS website. No

announcements made. Commissioner encouraged members to share information discussed at UTVA meetings with chapters and for chapters to share the information with its members.

Motion to adjourn, adjourn motioned, seconded, and meeting was adjourned.

Commissioner Grinder reminded attendees to ensure they pass along information to their chapters, and asked the Vietnam Veterans who haven't received their Vietnam Veteran lapel pin to come forward for presentation and recognition.

United Tennessee Veteran Association
 Member Sign-in Sheet
 ***(presenters need not sign)
 Thursday, March 3, 2016

<u>Name</u>	<u>Organization</u>	<u>E-mail</u>	<u>Phone Number</u>
1) JAMES PATTERSON	AMERICAN Legion	jpatterson@marioncounty-tn.gov	931-215-8254
2) MARY LEE FELDER	Am. Ex-POW	marylee@bellsouth.net	615-889-5659
3) Ron Bottomley	AMVETS	rbottomley@outlook.com	615-649-8892
4) FRANK FORBES	DAV	FForbes1@bellsouth.net	615-834-4077
5) Tim Coop	WNP	tcoop@woundedwvnp.org	904-451-8905
6)			
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