

# State of Tennessee Department of Veterans Services

## TriStars and Stripes: Governor's Council on Service Members, Veterans, and their Families

Meeting of October 24, 2023, at 11:00 am

Nashville, TN-Tennessee Tower, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, Conference Room G

### **Members:**

Charlotte "Charlie" Trussell – Family Member of Currently Serving Tennessee Citizen

Scott Brower – Higher Education

Marilyn Childress – Veteran Service Organizations or Coalitions

Blake Hogan – Veteran Service Organizations or Coalitions

Ralph Schulz – Business Interests

Joey Hale – Business Interests

Wes Golden – County/City Mayor

### **Ex-officio Members**

Commissioner of Veterans Services – Tommy Baker

TN Adjutant General of TN Dept. of Military – TAG BG Warner Ross, II

- Designee Lt. Col. John Rigdon

Commissioner of TN Dept. of Mental Health & Substance Abuse Services - Marie Williams

- Designee Rob Cotterman

Commissioner of TN Dept. of Labor & Workforce Development – Deniece Thomas

- Designee Jeff Dent

TN State Senator - Rusty Crowe

TN State Representative Jay Reedy

### **Guests**

- Michael Scholes
- Chelsea Anderson
- Deanna Day
- Stephen Bell
- Travis Murphy
- Patrick Rice
- Lorenza Wills
- Kathryn Held
- Sherry Pickering
- Grant Minchew
- Jennifer Allen

**Welcome:** Chris Lancia welcomed everyone, reviewed the meeting's agenda.

**Call to Order & Roll Call:** Deanna Day

### ***Members:***

- Charlotte "Charlie" Trussell – In Person

- Scott Brower – In Person
- Marilyn Childress – In Person
- Blake Hogan – In Person
- Ralph Schulz – In Person
- Joey Hale – In Person
- Wes Golden – In Person

**EX- Officio Members:**

- Commissioner Baker – In Person
- TAG BG Warner Ross, II – Not Present
  - Designee Lt. Col. John Rigdon – In Person
- Commissioner Deniece Thomas – In Person
  - Designee Jeffrey Dent – In Person
- Commissioner Marie Williams – Not Present
  - Designee Rob Cotterman – In Person
- TN State Senator Rusty Crow – In Person
- TN State Representative Jay Reedy – In Person

**Pledge of Allegiance:** Chris Lancia

**Welcome**

- **Opening Remarks**
  - Commissioner Baker provided opening remarks.
  - Commissioner Baker provided background on the formation & purpose of the council.
- **Council Member Introductions** – council members were asked to briefly introduce themselves and provide some information on their position, background, and any additional information on current initiatives, projects, etc.
- **Commissioner Baker introduces TDVS staff**
- **Administrative Notes** – Chris Lancia provides information regarding directions to the food court, a clipboard for audience members to provide their information, opportunities to address the council and time limits for speaking.

**Recess**

- **Call for Motion for 20 Minute Recess:** Chris Lancia

**Old Business:**

- **Approval of Minutes**
  - Motion – n/a
  - 2nd – n/a
  - Vote – n/a

**New Business:**

- **Announcements** – Chris Lancia informs the council of notary services provided by TDVS EA Chelsea Anderson, and an item that was dropped in the parking garage/where to pick it up.
- **Strategic Plan Framework/Overview** – Chris Lancia leads a discussion about the strategic plan draft for the council. He mentions the goal of completing a one-pager by January 1st, with the governor's office agreeing to accept the longer plan at a later date. The vision for the council is focused on presenting veterans and military families positively and addressing their needs and challenges. The mission is to make Tennessee the best state for service members and their

families to reside and thrive. The values include honor, trust, and connection. The floor is then opened for discussion among council members, with positive feedback on the overview provided by Chris.

- The discussion revolved around the importance of trust, connection, and honor when dealing with the veteran population. There was a focus on the challenges veterans face during their disengagement process from the military and the difficulties they encounter when seeking help from the VA. The need to rebuild trust and establish connections with veterans through effective communication and a unified approach was emphasized.
- The participants discussed the abundance of non-profit organizations and the challenges veterans face in identifying credible sources of support. The idea of creating coalitions and clearinghouses to streamline access to resources and services was suggested. Additionally, there was a proposal to implement a feedback system or reviews for services provided to veterans, allowing them to share their experiences and help build a reliable database.
- The issue of confusion between the US VA system and state-specific services in Tennessee was highlighted. The need for clear branding and identity for the state agency responsible for veteran services was discussed, aiming to distinguish it from the larger federal VA system.
- The meeting also touched upon the task assigned by the governor to review, evaluate, and maintain a comprehensive inventory of all programs within the executive branch of the state. This task aims to differentiate between state and federal benefits, providing clarity for veterans.
- Finally, the importance of marketing and outreach was emphasized, with the goal of creating accessible and up-to-date information sources for veterans, potentially replicating successful models from other states with larger budgets.
- **Committee Overviews** – During this part of the council meeting, the proposed committees were presented and discussed.
  - **Suicide Prevention:** The discussion continued with a focus on the proposed committee for Veterans suicide prevention. The speaker mentioned that the issue has been ongoing for a decade, involving various teams and organizations. They emphasized the need for innovative solutions and pointed out the importance of addressing the transition of service members out of the military. Later in the conversation, there was a perspective shared about the committee on suicide prevention. The speaker questioned the effectiveness of adding one more committee to tackle the issue and suggested that the broader problem lies in identity transition. They expressed the belief that successful transition to the labor force could help reduce homelessness and suicide. The discussion concluded with the acknowledgment that the suicide prevention committee is already active, led by Travis Murphy. The importance of not diluting the Council's efforts was highlighted, and members were encouraged to contribute additional resources to support the ongoing work.
  - **Military Spouse and Veteran Employment:** The discussion shifted to the next agenda item, focusing on military spouses and veteran employment, particularly the subcomponent related to military transition assistance. The speaker highlighted the importance of public-private partnerships and mentioned ongoing conversations with nonprofits willing to contribute. There was a mention of the need to guide and coordinate efforts to avoid the proliferation of numerous nonprofits working on similar goals. The idea of setting parameters and metrics to measure success was emphasized, considering the

expansive nature of the work. The conversation touched on the complexity of the topic, involving aspects such as workforce acclimation, training, and increasing veteran representation. The need for more discussion on where to assert efforts and influence outcomes, especially regarding transition and employment, was expressed. Commissioner Thomas emphasized the importance of strategically placing American Job Centers and veteran employment representatives across the state. The need for the Chair, Co-chairs, and working group committees to figure out goals, outcomes, and success metrics was highlighted. The idea of not just chasing numbers but understanding the outcomes they represent was stressed.

- **Education Benefits for Military-Connected Students:** The discussion shifted to education benefits for military-connected students, highlighting a nonprofit called The Gratitude Initiative. The organization works specifically with military-connected students and families of law enforcement personnel injured or killed in the line of duty. A success story was shared, where seven departments in the state supported a funding request benefiting 500 students. The Gratitude Initiative focuses on college preparation, starting from 8th grade and continuing through college graduation, including job transition assistance. One speaker emphasized the holistic support provided, addressing college prep, ACT scores, scholarship opportunities, and career coaching. The program aims to assist children of military personnel, including those who have been killed in combat, by offering them a free education in Tennessee. The potential impact on recruiting and retaining talent in the state was discussed, as the investment in children's education becomes a compelling reason for individuals to stay or relocate to Tennessee. Two participants shared insights into the comprehensive support provided by The Gratitude Initiative, covering SAT preparation, scholarship applications, and career coaching throughout the college years. A question was raised about whether there are conversations regarding alternative paths such as tech schools for military-connected students, considering the cultural shift towards diverse career choices. The response indicated that there are discussions about including tech schools and vocational programs under workforce development rather than solely focusing on traditional college paths. The importance of making students aware of various educational and career options from 8th grade onwards was highlighted, with legislative mandates in place to ensure such awareness. The involvement of the Youth Action Council and legislative initiatives related to education benefits for military children were also mentioned.
- **Homelessness and Food Insecurity** – The discussion continues with a focus on addressing homelessness and food insecurity among veterans. The participants emphasize the importance of setting specific goals and key performance indicators (KPIs) in the strategic plan. There is a mention of the need to present proposals in a way that highlights the return on investment for the governor's office.
- **Justice-Involved Veterans** – The conversation then shifts to addressing the needs of justice-involved individuals, with a focus on collaboration with the Tennessee Department of Correction (TDOC) to support inmates reentering society. The discussion touches on various initiatives, including working with Veterans Treatment Courts and providing education opportunities for justice-involved individuals. The participants discuss efforts to prepare individuals for reentry into society, including connecting them with county service officers and employment opportunities. The importance of supporting veterans to avoid recidivism and stay out of the criminal justice system is highlighted.
- **Female Veterans** – The conversation also addresses programs for female veterans, with Marilyn taking on a leadership role in this area. The lack of data specific to the needs of

female veterans is mentioned, and there is a proposal to conduct focus groups to gather insights directly from female veterans on their unique challenges and needs.

- **Outreach** – The discussion involved existing Town Halls organized by TDVS and the opportunity for complementary efforts. There was also mention of the focus on improved outreach efforts, especially marketing and communication, and the challenges presented at TDVS with limited staff and budget for marketing, and the reliance upon the secondary duties' of staff members. There was also a proposal to form private-public partnerships, highlighting how this could enhance the communication and outreach efforts. Emphasis was placed on leveraging personal networks for better outreach, highlighting how peer support plays a crucial role in informing the community about programs. There is acknowledgment that the lack of a dedicated expert in communication and outreach hampers the impact. Proposals include involving external experts for a comprehensive communications plan. Previous/current efforts were also discussed, to include utilization of social media, radio networks, local media outlets, and other methods of media. Challenges in search engine results also brought up the need for improved online visibility. Finally, consistency is emphasized in storytelling for effective communication. The idea is to maintain a unified message across various platforms.
- **Legislative Affairs** – The committee aims to ensure that recommendations are well-formatted for presentation to the legislature. Collaboration with departments and lawmakers is crucial for success.
- Overall, the participants express a commitment to making a meaningful impact through specific programs and initiatives to support veterans in various aspects of their lives.

- **The Way Ahead**

- **Benchmarking and Research:** The suggestion is to set benchmarks for committees, outlining goals for the next two, five, and ten years. Researching and learning from other states' strategies is also recommended.
- **State-Run Website:** Proposal for a state-run or public-private partnership website as a centralized hub for veteran information, including nonprofits, faith-based support, and family assistance.
- **Global Mental Health Crisis:** Acknowledgment of the global mental health crisis, with a call for a comprehensive approach to address issues such as suicide, marital problems, unemployment, and substance abuse among veterans.
- **One-Stop Information Hub:** The vision is to create a one-stop-shop for veterans, consolidating information from various committees and providing a centralized resource for those seeking assistance.
- **Emphasis on Collaboration:** Collaboration with universities, ROTC programs, and other stakeholders is seen as crucial for a holistic approach to veteran support.
- **Challenges in Budgeting:** The importance of allocating budget for outreach efforts is stressed, indicating a potential disconnect between prioritizing education and the willingness to invest financially.
- **Importance of Consistent Communication:** Consistent communication is considered essential, not only in committee meetings but also in informal settings like coffee, lunch, and dinner, to maintain focus on shared goals.

- **Adapting to Technology Trends:** Acknowledgment of banning TikTok in Tennessee and recognizing the need to adapt to emerging technology trends for effective outreach.
- **Google Ranking Challenges:** Highlighting the need for staff familiar with Google's algorithms to improve the state's visibility on online platforms.
- **Call to Action:** The meeting concludes with a call to action, emphasizing the need for collaboration, benchmarking, and a unified approach to address the challenges faced by veterans in Tennessee.

#### **Unfinished Business:**

- **Appointments – Deanna Day**

- All appointments are filled, currently needing appointment letters signed and notarized for a few council members.

- **Announcements:**

- **Upcoming Meeting Date Proposed:** January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2024.
- **Wreaths Across America:** Main event is scheduled for December 16<sup>th</sup>, with most wreaths being placed on the 17<sup>th</sup>.
- **Strategic Plan for Review:** A plan for review is due on December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2023. Council members are encouraged to review the plan and submit suggestions/feedback prior to the date.
- **Hilton Honors Military Program:** Commissioner Baker discussed the Hilton Honors Military Program, offering veterans transitioning to Tennessee up to 100,000 points for hotel stays during interviews. The program is set to start in January.
- **Business Recognition Program:** A veteran-ready business recognition program is in the final stages of development, with a soft launch on the horizon. The Commissioner emphasized the importance of effective communication and requested support from the committee members.

- **Floor Opened to Audience:**

- Megan Fisher from IO Studios expressed the agency's passion for supporting Veterans and offered their expertise on outreach efforts.

**Adjourn meeting -**