

# State of Tennessee Department of Veterans Services

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

Meeting of February 13, 2024, at 11:00 am

Nashville, TN-Tennessee Tower, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, Tennessee Room 1

### **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**

- Chelsea Anderson
- Deanna Day
- Stephen Bell
- Travis Murphy
- Lorenza Wills
- Kathryn Held
- Evan Ward
- Krissy Yamasse
- Sherry Pickering
- 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 – Microsoft Teams
- Blake Hogan – In Person
- Ralph Schulz – Microsoft Teams
- Joey Hale – Microsoft Teams
- Wes Golden – Not Present
  - Designee Andrew Kester – 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 – Not Present
  - Designee Jeffrey Dent – In Person
- Commissioner Marie Williams – Not Present
  - Designee Rob Cotterman – Microsoft Teams
- TN State Senator Rusty Crow – Not Present
- TN State Representative Jay Reedy – Microsoft Teams

**Pledge of Allegiance:** Chris Lancia

**Welcome**

- **Opening Remarks**
  - Commissioner Baker thanked all attendees for their commitment, despite recent adverse weather conditions, emphasizing the importance of safety and accessibility for all participants. He highlighted the progress made since the last meeting and the collaborative efforts of the Council.
- **Administrative Notes**
  - Chris Lancia provided 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.
  - Some technical issues were acknowledged regarding online audio, but efforts were made to resolve them to ensure effective participation.

**Recess**

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

**Old Business:**

- **Approval of Minutes**
  - Motion – State Representative Reedy
  - 2nd – n/a
  - Vote – Minutes Approved

**New Business:**

- A motion was made and approved to open new business, leading into discussions on the strategic framework for the Council and the upcoming strategic plan drafting process. Emphasis was placed on the need for enduring solutions beyond the current council's tenure.
- Following this discussion, a motion was made and approved to open committee reports.
- **Committee Reports/Updates** – During this part of the council meeting, the proposed committees were presented and discussed.

- **Military Spouse and Veteran Employment & Entrepreneurship:**
  - The council is co-chaired by Blake Hogan and Mick McGilloway.
  - The primary objective is to make Tennessee the number one state for economic success for veterans and their spouses, with an emphasis on equal opportunities for spouses.
  - Criteria for success include the number of veterans' spouses hired, their wages compared to other states, retention rates, and entrepreneurship activities.
  - The council is focused on two transitions: from gainful to meaningful employment, and from building to buying a business.
  - Efforts are underway to understand the existing resources and coordination in Tennessee, with the goal of creating an ecosystem that is more supportive and navigable for veterans and their spouses.
  - The council is working to recognize companies that are successfully hiring veterans and spouses to encourage others to follow suit.
  - Discussion included the idea of a "pipeline" for transitioning service members and spouses, with an emphasis on identifying successful practices and structures that create a veteran-ready environment.
  - Mention was made of a partnership with Nissan and the potential for using DPT (data, process, technology) to enhance support for veterans.
  - The Department of Labor highlighted initiatives such as the MO Perry Hilton Honors Program, the business engagement plan, and efforts to track transitioning service members.
- **Education Benefits for Military-Connected Students:**
  - The committee is chaired by Scott Brower, who listed the members, including representatives from the Tennessee Department of Veteran Services, universities, and schools.
  - The committee is focused on aligning education with employment opportunities for military members and their families.
  - Challenges include service members seeking the path of least resistance for education without considering future employment, and difficulties in transferring credits between states for K-12 students.
  - Efforts include supporting programs like the Gratitude Initiative and the ACE (American Council on Education) military transcript evaluation system.
  - There is a desire to expand state-level education support beyond the Post-9/11 GI Bill to attract and retain talent in Tennessee.
  - The committee is also exploring ways to support military children who may be first-generation college students and parents who may be deployed or single parents.
  - The committee aims to make education more accessible and supportive for military families, including through teacher recruitment from the military community.
  - Challenges include aligning education for military members post-service, such as evaluating military experience for college credit, which can vary widely between universities.
  - Opportunities for collaboration include engaging universities at Yellow Ribbon reintegration events to raise awareness of education benefits for military members.
  - There is a commitment from military leadership to help facilitate these collaborations and improve access to education resources for service members and their families.
- **Homelessness and Food Insecurity –**

- The Veteran Homelessness and Food Insecurity Committee, led by Donald May, aims to provide recommendations to address veteran homelessness and food insecurity in Tennessee.
  - The committee consists of various members, including government officials and nonprofit representatives.
  - Their vision is to provide input and recommendations to the coordinating body for Tennessee, focusing on achieving functional zero in veteran homelessness, facilitating data exchange, addressing barriers to food insecurity, and reducing relapses into homelessness.
  - Their priorities include achieving functional zero, facilitating data exchange, reducing relapses, examining housing accessibility, enhancing emergency shelter and transitional housing, and creating collaborative pathways to address food insecurity for veterans and their families.
- **Justice-Involved Veterans** – The Justice-Involved Veterans presentation highlighted the success of the Veterans Treatment Court (VTC) in Montgomery County and its potential for statewide implementation. Key points included:
  - Montgomery County has the largest VTC in Tennessee, with a 99% participant rate and a 9% recidivism rate for veterans.
  - The VTC model focuses on providing structure and purpose to veterans, including active-duty service members, who may lose their way after leaving the military.
  - The program offers mental health treatment, volunteer services, and community involvement opportunities, helping participants reintegrate into society.
  - Mayor Golden emphasized the need to expand VTCs across the state and secure funding through grants.
  - The program's success is measured by its impact on reducing recidivism rates and providing a pathway for veterans to rebuild their lives.
  - Collaboration with other committees, such as education and workforce, is crucial to addressing the needs of justice-involved veterans and their families.
  - The program's success can be attributed to its focus on structure, planning for the future, and community engagement.
  - The presentation underscored the importance of VTCs in supporting veterans' reintegration into civilian life and reducing recidivism rates among this population.
- **Female Veterans** – The Programs for Female Veterans Committee, chaired by Marilyn Childress, discussed their plans to address the unique needs of women veterans in Tennessee. Key points included:
  - Conducting surveys to better understand the needs of women veterans, with a focus on different age groups and service durations.
  - Planning town hall meetings or gatherings to meet with women veterans face-to-face and gather feedback.
  - Recognizing that some VSOs and CSOs lack understanding of women's needs, highlighting the need for education and training.
  - Addressing challenges faced by homeless women veterans, especially those with children, and collaborating with other committees on homelessness and food insecurity.
  - Recognizing a need for better communication about benefits and resources available to women veterans, including those transitioning out of the service.
  - Considering the need for substance abuse and dual diagnosis treatment programs tailored to the specific needs of women veterans.

- The committee emphasized the importance of education, outreach, and collaboration to effectively support women veterans across Tennessee.
- **Suicide Prevention** – The Service Member, Veteran, and Military Family (SMVF) Suicide Prevention Committee, co-chaired by Travis Murphy and Rob Cotterman, discussed their efforts to address the high suicide rates among veterans in Tennessee. Key points from their report included:
  - Acknowledging that the veteran suicide rate in Tennessee is higher than the national average and higher than in neighboring states.
  - The committee's vision is to create a unified community that supports Tennessee service members, veterans, and their families to thrive with honor, connection, and hope.
  - The committee is diverse, consisting of representatives from federal, state, local, nonprofit, and for-profit organizations. They aim to improve geographic diversity in their membership.
  - They have met twice, focusing on strategic planning and identifying priorities and strategies.
  - Their priorities include strengthening partnerships with external organizations, increasing awareness and education, and improving suicide prevention efforts.
  - Strategies include sharing timely and valid data, building a network of coalitions and partners, and fostering engagement with communities.
  - The committee plans to create a framework for suicide prevention in Tennessee, focusing on factors like increased enrollment in VA healthcare and certification for veteran peer recovery support specialists.
  - They emphasized the importance of addressing mental health issues, sense of purpose, and community belonging to prevent suicide among veterans.
  - The committee plans to collaborate with other subcommittees, such as the Labor Committee, to address broader issues like purpose and livelihood, which can impact mental health and suicide rates.
  - Overall, the committee is committed to addressing the root causes of veteran suicide and creating a supportive environment for veterans and their families in Tennessee.
- **Outreach** – The Veteran Outreach Committee, co-chaired by Megan Fisher and Lisa Shock, presented their efforts to enhance outreach efforts and messaging to veterans in Tennessee. Key points from their report included:
  - The committee's goal is to develop a user-friendly, integrated, searchable directory of support programs available in Tennessee for veterans.
  - They aim to create a funnel for all announcements related to veteran benefits and programs, ensuring that relevant information reaches the intended audience.
  - Governance and oversight are essential for maintaining the directory and ensuring that all initiatives are included.
  - The committee highlighted the importance of storytelling and promoting positive stories about why staying in Tennessee is meaningful for veterans and their families.
  - They discussed the need for an ambassador network to serve as liaisons between the committee and various organizations and corporations, promoting veteran-friendly policies and programs.
  - Researching competition to understand why veterans are leaving Tennessee and where they are going can provide valuable insights for improving outreach efforts.

- Enhancing the digital presence of the Tennessee Department of Veteran Services (TDVS) website with infographics, videos, and user-friendly features is crucial for reaching a wider audience.
  - Developing messaging strategies and a veteran-to-veteran mentor network can further support outreach efforts.
  - Incorporating input from other committees within the council ensures that outreach efforts align with the overall goals of TDVS.
  - Overall, the committee is focused on improving communication and outreach to veterans, highlighting the benefits of staying in Tennessee, and ensuring that veterans have access to the resources and support they need.
- **Legislative Affairs** – The Legislative Affairs Committee provided an overview of the legislative process and budgeting timeline for the state of Tennessee, specifically from the perspective of an executive agency like the Department of Veteran Services (TDVS). Key points from their presentations included:
- **Legislative Process:**
  - The legislative process starts in January when the General Assembly convenes, with the bill filing deadline typically in early February.
  - Agencies like DVS need to get their legislative ideas approved by the governor's office before they can be filed as bills.
  - Departments should start forming ideas for potential legislation around April, with a focus on vetting and developing them through the summer months.
  - By late June, ideas should be thoroughly developed and ready for submission to the governor's office for review.
  - The governor's team reviews and vets proposals in late June to early July, making decisions on whether to move forward with them.
  - From October to December, the governor's office finalizes the legislative package to be sent to leadership in the House and Senate for the next session.
- **Budget Information:**
  - Budget requests for the next fiscal year should be submitted around April to May, with finalization and submission to the governor's office in August to September.
  - The state fiscal year runs from July 1st to June 30th, different from the federal fiscal year of October 1st to September 30th.
- **Summary:**
  - Overall, the committee emphasized the importance of starting early in the year to develop and vet legislative ideas and budget requests to ensure they are ready for the next legislative session and fiscal year.
- **The Way Ahead**
- **Announcements:**
  - **Upcoming Meeting Date Proposed:** April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2024.
  - Other announcements included updates on the Veteran Ready Business Recognition Program, the Hiring Our Heroes Foundation meeting, and the Economic Summit.
  - The meeting concluded with appreciation for the members' efforts and a reminder to stay engaged and informed about each other's work.
- **Floor Opened to Audience:**
  - N/A

**Adjourn meeting -**