

# State of Tennessee Department of Veterans Services

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

Meeting of October 21, 2025, at 11:00 am  
Nashville, TN-Tennessee Tower, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, Nashville Room

### **Members:**

Tess Partridge – 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 Col. Susan Parker

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

- Designee Sejal West

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
- Travis Murphy
- Kathryn Held
- Sherry Pickering
- Mary Deel
- Daniel Moore
- Paul Overholser
- Daniel Noffsinger
- Terry Love
- Rod Key
- Dr. Pam Arnell
- LaDonna Merville
- Rebecca Willis-Nichols
- Chris Lancia
- Joshua Burch
- Peter Roth

**Welcome:** Nick Atwood welcomed everyone, reviewed the meeting's agenda.

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

**Members:**

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

**EX- Officio Members:**

- Commissioner Baker – Teams
  - Designee Deputy Commissioner Scholes – In Person
- TAG BG Warner Ross, II – Not Present
  - Designee Col. Susan Parker – Present
- Commissioner Deniece Thomas – Not Present
  - Designee Jeff Dent – In Person
- Commissioner Marie Williams – Not Present
  - Designee Sejal West – In Person
- TN State Senator Rusty Crow – In Person
- TN State Representative Jay Reedy – Not Present

**Pledge of Allegiance:** Nick Atwood

**Welcome**

- **Opening Remarks**
  - Commissioner Baker gave opening remarks.
  - Nick Atwood opened up the floor for council members to share thoughts for a few minutes before moving into the approval of minutes.
- **Administrative Notes**
  - A reminder for everyone to turn their microphone on when speaking was provided, in order to ensure all comments were captured accordingly.

**Old Business:**

- **Approval of Minutes**
  - Motion: Senator Crowe
    - Seconded: Ralph Schulz
    - Vote – Approved Unanimously

**New Business:**

- **Veteran Coordination Platform Update**
  - Commissioner Baker provided an update on the Veteran Coordination Platform.
  - The Veteran Coordination Platform is a new initiative funded in last year's budget to serve as a next-generation hub for Tennessee's 430,000+ veterans and their families (1.2-1.3M including spouses and dependents).
  - Vendor: FindHelp (already works with other TN state departments)

- Core Capabilities
  1. Resource Mapping
    - Live directory of all verified veteran-serving organizations
    - ZIP code-level search capability (localized results)
  2. Referral Management
    - Connects service-seekers with providers
    - Target response time: within 72 hours
    - Real-time contact facilitation
  3. Data Analytics
    - Track return on investment
    - Measure system effectiveness
    - Inform resource allocation decisions
- Strategic Benefits
  - Unified access point for veteran services
  - Cross-agency collaboration with state partners (Military Department, ECD, Labor, Mental Health, etc.)
  - Integration with Veteran Ready Business Recognition (VRBR) program
  - Resource optimization for better decision-making
- Goals
  - 1500+ provider organizations onboarded statewide
  - 25,000+ veterans/family members connected through referrals
  - 30% of providers enrolled in the VRBR program
  - 72-hour (or less) referral efficiency
  - Measurable ROI data
- Expected Outcomes
  - Increased economic participation and veteran workforce engagement
  - Reduced social isolation for veterans
  - Eliminated duplicative efforts across organizations
  - Positioned Tennessee as top state for veteran families
  - Connected infrastructure across all veteran programs
- **Comprehensive Benefits & Services Guide Update**
  - Nick Atwood provided an update on the Comprehensive Benefits & Services Guide
  - Current Status:
    - Timeline:
      - Original Target Release: October (this month)
      - Revised Target: Around Veterans Day (draft for review)
    - Progress:
      - Document substantially complete
      - Currently in internal review process at Comptroller's office
      - Expanded from 44 pages to 50+ pages (reflects additional programs/services)
  - Review Process & Next Steps:
    - Council Review
      - Draft will be emailed to all Council members upon receipt
      - Council members requested to review ASAP
      - Opportunity to provide feedback before document becomes final
    - Departmental Review
      - Draft will simultaneously go to all 23 state departments
      - Departments asked to review their sections and respond quickly

- Nick plans on working with Governor's office to encourage Commissioner participation
  - Next Steps (following approval from Council and departments)
    - Send feedback to Comptroller for finalization
    - Publish document
    - Begin promotion through outreach efforts
  - Strategic Importance
    - One of two major deliverables from Governor's Executive Order (alongside strategic plan)
    - Demonstrates significant progress on executive directive
- **July Meeting After Action Report (AAR)**
  - Nick Atwood provided a brief summary of the AAR from the 2025 July Council Meeting.
  - What Worked:
    - TCAT tour and catered "meat and three" food were well-received
    - Strong attendance from West Tennessee stakeholders, senators' offices, and mayors thanks to outreach by Debbie Dunaway and Joey Hale
    - Commissioner Baker called it one of the best meetings in Council history
    - Helicopter rides from General Brauer/General Ross enhanced experience
  - What Needs Improvement:
    - Virtual dial-in failed due to TCAT's audio-visual limitations - will need to thoroughly check technology for future off-site meetings
    - Need backup helicopter capacity (one aircraft went down)
  - Looking Ahead:
    - Council wants to continue off-site meetings
      - April suggested as next opportunity
      - Mayor Golden offered to host in Montgomery County/Clarksville
    - Recommendation to align future meetings with strategic objectives and co-locate with veteran-focused events (e.g., VRBR symposium in Upper East Tennessee)
- **Military Spouse Licensure Initiative**
  - General Brower and Major Jessica Kent presented on expediting professional licensure for military spouses relocating to Tennessee
  - The Problem:
    - Military spouses face 6+ month delays obtaining professional licenses (teachers, nurses, lawyers, medical professionals) when relocating to Tennessee, creating employment barriers and financial hardship.
  - Key Developments:
    - General Gardner (new Ft. Campbell Commander) raised issue with Governor Lee; spouses provided concrete examples of struggles
    - Commissioner Dunn (Dept. of Health) meeting at Fort Campbell October 24th to address medical field licensure issues
    - Major Kent reviewed 12 professional compacts; Tennessee has strong compacts but "clunky" healthcare processes and communication gaps
    - Arizona benchmark: Guaranteed right to work within 30 days for all professions
    - Additional barriers: Recertification fees and lengthy processes make returning to work financially prohibitive for some spouses
  - Next Steps:
    - Major Kent continuing work with General Gardner; hopes to follow-up with briefing Council on progress

- **Committee Updates**
  - **SMVF Employment and Entrepreneurship Committee – Blake Hogan**
    - The Opportunity: Connect veterans interested in buying small businesses with retiring business owners across Tennessee, leveraging existing capital resources and state support.
    - The Problem:
      - Small business owners (e.g., 30-year plumbing companies) ready to retire but lack transition plans
      - Veterans have skills/licenses but are intimidated by business acquisition process
      - 8 out of 10 small businesses fail to sell; those that do often regret poor transitions
      - Capital exists but no coordinated strategy to connect veterans with opportunities
    - Existing Resources:
      - Launch Tennessee allocated \$130M+ to CDFIs (Community Development Financial Institutions)
      - SBA lending process available (but straightforward doesn't mean easy)
      - Veteran Business Outreach Centers (VBOCs) offer 2-day workshops, but focus on startups not acquisitions
    - Proposed Solutions:
      - Tax incentives for investors (e.g., \$50K investment = \$50K tax credit to help with 10-20% down payment)
      - Subsidized state healthcare for veteran business owners during first 1-2 years
      - Connection infrastructure through Veterans Coordination Platform or ECD network
      - Track veteran-owned business data statewide
    - Next Steps:
      - Blake and Ralph to develop concrete proposals for capital incentives and connection frameworks
      - Return to Council with actionable proposal for vote
  - **SMVF Equity & Resources Committee – Marylin Childress**
    - Homelessness Committee: Seeking new members after some dropoffs; recruited Chattanooga expert with 11 years functional zero experience (successful 5-6 years)
    - Women's Committee: Almost all previous members agreed to continue; meeting scheduled for November
    - Justice-Related Committee: No responses received; may need re-evaluation
    - New appointment: Mayor Jacobs appointed Marilyn to Knox County Office of Housing Stability (oversees continuing care for homelessness across Knox County and surrounding areas; 20+ organizations involved; office established 1.5 years ago as joint city/county effort)
    - Wreaths Across America reminder: Encouraged donations and participation; placing wreaths at Smoky Mountains for 250+ veterans buried there in December
  - **SMVF Education Benefits Committee – Scott Brower**
    - Working to form collaboration group of veteran/military resource centers across Tennessee universities (modeled after SEC schools practice)
    - Already engaged: ETSU, MTSU, Austin Peay, UTK, Vanderbilt

- Focus: Best practices sharing beyond benefits/certifying officials (joint service transcript review, student employment outcomes, addressing issues like government shutdown impacts on benefits)
- Talking to THEC and determining POCs for Tennessee-based institutions

## **Announcements:**

- **TDVS Announcements**

- Governor's Veterans Day Program & Marine Corps 250<sup>th</sup> Birthday
  - November 10, 2025 from 11:00am – 12:30pm
  - National Guard Armory, Hall of Flags
  - Following the Veterans Day Ceremony, there will be a small ceremony and cake to celebrate the Marine Corps' 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary
- Veteran Town Hall – UTK
  - November 13, 2025, from 10:00am – 2:00pm CST
  - University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Student Union 272

- **Other Announcements:**

- Paychecks for Patriots – Job & Resource Fair
  - October 29, 2025, from 9:00am – 3:00pm at 5 locations
    - CST – Clarksville, Memphis, Nashville
    - EST – Chattanooga, Knoxville
  - <https://www.tn.gov/careers/hiring-events/2025/10/29/paychecks-for-patriots.html>

- **The Way Ahead:**

- Re-engage committee meetings between quarterly council meetings
- Execute Strategic Plan Action Steps and monitor KPIs
- Continue building out the Tri-Stars and Stripes Council website
- Prepare for the release of the TN Comptroller's comprehensive report on benefits and services for SMVF on or after Veterans Day 2025

- **Upcoming Meeting Date Proposed:** January 20, 2026

## **Public Comment Period:**

- N/A

## **Adjourn meeting -**