

State of Tennessee Department of Veterans Services

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

Meeting of January 20, 2026, at 11:00 am
Nashville, TN-Tennessee Tower, 3rd 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
- Sherry Pickering
- Mary Deel
- Daniel Moore
- Paul Overholser
- Jennifer Chesser
- Ed Harries
- Ashley Lamm
- Daniel Noffsinger
- LaDonna Merville (Teams)
- Megan Fischer (Teams)
- Joshua Burch
- Daniel Bishop
- Maureen Diffley (Teams)
- Emily Hager (Teams)

- Erin Gurak
- Kraig Dalton
- Samantha Sliney
- Rudy Rodriguez
- Walter Stockard
- Ken Hanson
- Jeremy White

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

Call to Order & Roll Call: Deanna Day

Members:

- Tess Partridge – In Person
- Scott Brower – Not Present
- 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 – Not Present
- TAG BG Warner Ross, II – Teams
 - Designee Col. Susan Parker – Teams
- 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 – Not Present
- TN State Representative Jay Reedy – Not Present

Pledge of Allegiance: Nick Atwood

Welcome

- **Opening Remarks**
 - Commissioner Baker gave opening remarks.
 - Commissioner welcomed members to the first meeting of 2026. He noted that the Council was reconstituted by the Governor in 2023, reducing membership from 17 to 13 and changing its composition to bring in diverse voices from across the veteran space. He expressed appreciation for two years of productive meetings and indicated the day's agenda would be particularly substantive.
 - Brigadier General (Retired) Scott Brower submitted his resignation due to other commitments. He represented the Council on the Higher Education Committee and was thanked for his service.
 - Colonel Dan Bishop has been nominated to fill the vacancy. Paperwork has been submitted and the appointment is expected to be finalized by the April meeting, at which point he will assume General Briar's seat on the Higher Education Committee.

- Nick will present the updated Comprehensive Veterans Report. The previous report was published in 2021; this report covers FY2023–2024 data. The Commissioner encouraged all members to review it thoroughly as a resource for understanding the current state of Tennessee's veteran population.
- Sam Sliney from the Southeast Region State Liaison Office was introduced as a presenter to provide information on veteran-related activities and initiatives in Tennessee and surrounding states, as well as potential legislative opportunities to advance the interests of veterans, service members, and military families.
- Nick Atwood provided some updates for the council:
 - Committees have been meeting between quarterly Council meetings to make progress on the strategic plan. Nick noted productive meetings with the following groups:
 - Travis Murphy – Suicide Prevention Committee
 - Marylin Childress and Jeff Dent – Equity and Resources Committee
 - Blake Hogan and Ralph Schulz – Entrepreneurship Committee
 - Joey Hale – Outreach Committee
 - Four new Veteran Fellows were introduced – Rudy, Bevan, Rich, and Walt.
- **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: Marilyn Childress
 - Seconded: Blake Hogan
 - Vote – Approved Unanimously

New Business:

- **Veteran Coordination Platform Update**
 - Commissioner Baker discussed the Veterans Connect Platform. Find Help, the contracted vendor, was present for a full presentation. Key points:
 - **Purpose:** Address fragmentation in the veteran services space by providing veterans, service members, and families a single platform to locate public and private sector services within a few clicks.
 - **Back-end capability:** Provides strategic leadership with outcome data on what organizations are delivering, enabling evidence-based budget and resource decisions and identification of service gaps statewide.
 - **Vendor background:** Find Help is already operating within some Tennessee state agencies and understands state government structure. Nick has already spoken with several Council members about the platform.
 - **Timeline:** Launch is targeted for April 2026. The next 90 days are critical for Council input on platform configuration and arrangement.
 - **Strategic alignment:** The platform directly advances three Council strategic goals — information sharing and outreach, making Tennessee the best state in the Union

for veteran destinations, and advancing the health and well-being of the veteran population.

- **Comprehensive Benefits & Services Guide Update**

- Nick Atwood provided an update on the Comprehensive Benefits & Services Guide, noting that a draft originally expected around Veterans Day was delayed due to the scope of the project. The Comptroller's Office has been working diligently and the draft is now complete. Key points:

- Each Council member will receive a copy via email before the end of the meeting.
- **The suspense date for feedback is January 29th.**
- The guide has been distributed to every relevant state department for review, including Mental Health, Labor and Workforce, Veterans Services, and ECD.
- Members were asked to review and flag any needed edits or adjustments.
- Completing the guide fulfills a major requirement under the Governor's Executive Order and checks off two significant items in the Council's strategic plan.

- **Committee Updates**

- **SMVF Suicide Prevention Committee – Travis Murphy**

- **KPI Updates**

- SMVF resources in TN Dept. of Health directory: Successfully incorporated two SMVF-serving resources into the Department of Health Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Services state directory and resource guide. Next step is integrating these into the veteran coordination platform.
- SMVF strategies in Dept. of Health Suicide Prevention Report: Several recommendations submitted in April were included in the report, specifically highlighting free gatekeeper suicide prevention training through the VA and PsychArmor, and promoting the VA's "Keep It Secure" firearm safety campaign.
- CPRS Veteran Designation: Working with the Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services to issue the first CPRS (Certified Peer Recovery Specialist) veteran designation in 2026. Curriculum is largely complete, with federal technical assistance received. Currently sourcing presenters and instructors — on track to issue the first endorsement this calendar year.
- VA Healthcare Enrollment (+2.5% goal): Currently at 1.98% growth as of September data; VA is reporting quarterly and an update is expected in January. Over 50% of Tennessee veterans are now enrolled in VA healthcare, which is recognized as a protective factor.
- Looking Ahead:
 - Continue exploring strategies to increase VA healthcare enrollment, including engaging additional partners beyond current department marketing efforts.
 - Coordinate with Joey and the Outreach Committee to leverage the veteran coordination platform for outreach.
 - Explore a proposal from a VET Center partner to provide information to veterans when they engage with driver services or county tax entities.
 - Raise awareness about the department's free legal assistance program for veterans seeking discharge upgrades, which has been in development for over a year.
- Nick's Remarks:

- Nick recognized the Suicide Prevention Committee for its strong participation rates and consistency. Virtual meetings have drawn 25–30 participants including the VA, counties, vet centers, and nonprofits. The committee has also rotated meeting locations across the state to reach members in their own regions. Nick highlighted the Department of Mental Health as a longstanding and valued partner in this work.
- **SMVF Equity & Resources Committee – Marilyn Childress**
 - Overview
 - The Equity and Resources Committee has three subcommittees. Marilyn provided an update focused primarily on the Homelessness Subcommittee.
 - Homelessness Subcommittee
 - The subcommittee has met twice since the last quarterly Council meeting. A key early task was reconfirming membership after delays caused some members to drop off. Current members: Sherry Pickering, Mary Ross, Debbie Fields, Marine Diffler, Robert Duskins, Aaron Scott, Casey Tinker, Marilyn, and Jeffrey. Geographic coverage across the state is nearly complete, and several members are actively working in the homelessness space.
 - Primary focus going forward is identifying best practices that can be implemented in areas with the greatest need.
 - Notable Developments:
 - Mayors Pledge: Although the VA discontinued its formal program, the committee is continuing to pursue the pledge independently. Mayor Jacobs of Knox County has already signed on. Outreach to Knoxville Mayor Concannon is in progress — a prior signing appointment was canceled when the VA program was discontinued, but she has indicated willingness to participate.
 - Operation HEAL (Knox County): Mayor Jacobs launched a tiny homes initiative, with county trade schools and high schools building the homes. Highlighted as a strong best practice model worth examining.
 - Knoxville/Knox County Housing Authority: A committee member was appointed by Mayor Jacobs to the Knoxville and Knox County Housing Authority for Homelessness, Civility, Housing and Stability Board — filling a gap as the board previously had no veteran representation.
 - Nashville-area efforts: A committee member has been in contact with a First Baptist Church pastor who has land available for veteran-related use. Coordination with Sherry and HUD-VASH is underway. A local contractor with two houses is also interested in renting to veterans with HUD-VASH vouchers.
 - Veteran-specific warming centers: A committee member flagged that some veterans avoid general warming centers due to crowds, which is a known challenge for veterans with certain conditions. A Knoxville group has established a separate warming center specifically for veterans. The committee discussed adding veteran-specific warming center outreach to its scope of work.
 - Justice-Involved Veterans Subcommittee
 - Jeremy White, Director of the Office of Re-entry with the Tennessee Department of Labor, was introduced and addressed the Council. Key points from his remarks:

- Comes from a multi-generational military family and is personally committed to serving veterans.
- Served 22 years in the Tennessee Department of Corrections and now leads the Office of Re-entry, focused on creating pathways — not pipelines — for currently and formerly incarcerated Tennesseans, including veterans.
- Committed to stepping in as lead for justice-involved veterans under the Equity and Resources Committee.
- The Office of Re-entry currently operates four active programs statewide, including:
 - Lincoln Employment Activities Pre-Release, active in eight prisons, focused on connecting individuals to employment before release.
 - Community Re-entry Reinvestment Grant, distributed through Tennessee's local workforce boards, with over \$150,000 available at each board for training, supportive services, and employment access for justice-involved individuals.
 - An environmental scan has identified over 200 employers statewide willing to hire second-chance individuals.
- **SMVF Outreach Committee - Joey Hale**
 - Objective
 - Improve information sharing and access to information for veterans and their families in Tennessee.
 - NFC Tap Card Concept
 - The committee's main update was a proposed outreach tool using NFC (Near Field Communication) technology — physical tap cards or stickers that veterans can tap with their phone to be directed instantly to veteran services information. Key points:
 - Currently programmed to direct to the Tri-Stars and Stripes website as a placeholder, but can be updated to point to Veterans Connect once it launches in April.
 - Designed as an affordable, tangible tool to get information to veterans, particularly those who may not be actively searching online.
 - Scalable and flexible — can be configured to link to a single resource (such as a PDF or webpage) or a multi-option tap board with several information destinations.
 - NFC technology is not new — businesses have used it for roughly five years — but represents a newer approach for government outreach.
 - Tap activity can be tracked to measure ROI and determine whether the tool is actually driving engagement, moving beyond the "we created it and hoped for the best" approach.
 - Physical distribution is still to be worked out — potential placement in county courthouses, DMVs, and similar high-traffic locations where veterans interact with government services.
 - A full marketing plan will still be needed, as not all veterans will be comfortable with tap technology. Mailers, QR codes, and other formats should complement the tap card approach.
 - Discussion

- Nick noted that a comprehensive marketing plan from Paul will help establish consistent core messaging, which is a prerequisite for any of these outreach tools to be effective. The group agreed that whatever format is used, the messaging must be consistent and sustained — not just a short-term push. The committee views the NFC concept as one component of a broader, multifaceted outreach strategy.
- **SMVF Employment and Entrepreneurship Committee – Blake Hogan**
 - Overview
 - Blake provided a follow-up to his presentation from the previous meeting, focused on veteran small business acquisition as an economic opportunity for Tennessee.
 - The Opportunity
 - Tennessee has approximately 741,000 small businesses, representing 99% of all businesses in the state, employing just over one million people.
 - Of the roughly 100,000 employer-based businesses, an estimated 50% are at or near retirement age — meaning approximately 50,000 businesses need to transition ownership.
 - Tennessee has existing capital available for small businesses through Fund Tennessee, Lend Tennessee, and CDFIs (including Pathway Lending), totaling roughly \$47 million — but none of it is specifically earmarked for business acquisition or for veterans.
 - Five-Area Framework
 - The committee is focused on five strategies to connect veterans with small business acquisition opportunities:
 - Veteran buyer incentive — Proposed waiver or cap on franchise and excise tax for the first one to three years after a veteran acquires a business (currently 6.5%), freeing up capital for reinvestment in hiring, equipment, and operations.
 - Seller incentive — Rebates or tax relief to incentivize retiring business owners to sell to veterans, reducing the burden of what is often the largest financial transaction of their lives.
 - Investor incentive — Leverage existing public-private matching capital mechanisms to support veteran buyers.
 - Leverage existing capital — Develop a strategy to direct existing Lend Tennessee funds specifically toward veteran small business acquisition, which currently lacks a dedicated focus.
 - Buyer-seller connection platform — Use Veterans Connect or a similar tool as a confidential opt-in marketplace to match veteran buyers with business owners looking to sell. Currently, Tennessee does not track veteran business ownership at the point of registration or tax filing, so a simple opt-in mechanism would be a meaningful first step.
 - Blake emphasized that this is not a large capital ask, particularly in the pilot phase, as many pieces already exist in various programs — the goal is to connect and align them.
 - Veteran Ready Business Recognition Program
 - Nick raised the Veteran Ready Business Recognition Program, noting that Steve and his team have been actively promoting it through Rotary clubs, chambers of commerce, and coalitions. The Secretary of State endorsed the

program via email in November, which generated momentum. The group discussed how to better integrate the program into broader outreach efforts and connect veteran-friendly employers with programs already operating in the nonprofit space, such as Boots to Business, Next Stop, The Honor Foundation, OSD's Career Recon, and Bridge My Return.

- Key Takeaway
 - The committee sees small business acquisition as an underserved but high-impact space — veterans bring the discipline and leadership to run established businesses, retiring owners get a qualified buyer, and communities retain jobs. The work this year will focus on refining the five strategies and identifying what policy or programmatic changes are needed to bring them to life.

- **Veterans Connect Platform Q&A – FindHelp Presentation & Follow-Up Discussion**

- Overview – Paul Overholser, TDVS
 - Paul presented Veterans Connect on behalf of TDVS and Commissioner Baker. He opened by clarifying what the platform is and is not — not just a website or a directory, but a statewide coordination capability. The platform's motto is "one platform, one connection, one community." Veterans Connect is powered by Find Help but owned and controlled by the state of Tennessee, designed around the veteran ecosystem and the department's priorities.
 - The core goal: provide a secure statewide platform that allows service members, veterans, and their families to discover, access, and coordinate services — whether on their own or through a navigator — while giving community and state leaders data-driven insights to make better funding, policy, and partnership decisions.
- The Problem: Fragmentation
 - Currently, referrals across state agencies, county offices, CBOs, and employers are tracked through emails, spreadsheets, informal follow-ups, or not at all. As a result, leadership lacks a shared understanding of who received help, what help was provided, and what the outcomes were. Veterans Connect is designed to solve that by creating a single point of entry, standardizing referrals, and reducing fragmentation across all 95 counties.
- Core Functions
 - Find and map resources — Real-time directory searchable by ZIP code with eligibility and service area detail.
 - Make and track referrals — Standardized electronic referrals tracked consistently statewide.
 - Manage cases — Understand a veteran's journey across the lifetime of their engagement with the system, not just one transaction.
 - Data and analytics — Referral volumes, completion rates, utilization trends, and gap identification to support evidence-based decisions on strategy, funding, and partnerships.
 - All four functions are built around a closed loop referral system — a fundamental shift from the current fragmented model. In plain terms: today, when a VSO refers a veteran to a housing program, there is often no confirmation of whether the veteran actually received help. With Veterans Connect, every referral reaches a conclusive outcome — eligible, referred elsewhere, received help, or not helped — and all referrals are monitored and closed.

- Who It Serves
 - At the center: service members, veterans, and their families. Supporting layers: TDVS staff, state and county staff, partner agencies, and CBOs. At the leadership level: data and accountability to inform decisions.
- Strategic Plan Alignment
 - Veterans Connect directly supports three Council strategic goals: increasing access to care and community resources; improving coordination so veterans are not bounced between organizations; and informing leadership through data-driven decision-making.
- Find Help Presentation – Craig Dalton, State Director, and Erin Goreck, Director of Government Delivery
 - Craig noted that Find Help is the nation's largest social care platform, with community-based resources in every ZIP code in the United States. Resources are curated by an in-house team — not scraped from other directories — and updated regularly. Organizations can also be suggested by the public directly through the site.
 - Current project status: in the development phase, focusing on system integrations, workflow development, partner identification, and onboarding. Target go-live remains April 2026. A VA eligibility status integration is in progress.
- Platform Demo – Erin Goreck
 - Erin walked through three user perspectives using a demo environment with Veterans Connect branding:
 - Veteran / General Public View – A veteran in the Clarksville area searching for employment support can enter their ZIP code, filter by category and personal identifiers (including veteran status), view a map of nearby programs, and self-refer with per-referral consent required for every submission. After referring, the veteran receives an email with program information and a link to a personal "referrals for me" page to track the status of all their referrals over time.
 - Community Based Organization (CBO) View – When a referral comes in, the CBO receives an email and can access an inbound referrals dashboard showing all incoming referrals with status, notes, and contact information. Referral statuses include positive outcomes (got help, referred elsewhere) and closed-but-unsuccessful outcomes (not eligible, no longer interested, unable to contact), ensuring every referral is accounted for regardless of outcome. CBOs can add notes to veteran profiles visible to other partnering organizations.
 - Staff / VSO Navigator View – Veteran service officers and county service officers log into a separate staff site to place referrals on behalf of veterans, track their caseloads via a "people I'm helping" dashboard, send notes to CBOs, and monitor outcomes for all veterans they are serving. Notes can be shared across organizations to improve coordination.
- Analytics Dashboards
 - Leadership will have access to two main dashboards: a search activity dashboard showing aggregate search volume, categories, and common search terms statewide; and a referral activity dashboard showing referral volumes, response rates, loop closure rates, and most-referred-to programs, filterable by ZIP code and county. These allow leaders to identify service gaps, target outreach, and demonstrate return on investment to the legislature and partners.

- The following questions and discussion occurred following the Find Help presentation on the Veterans Connect.
 - Listing Criteria and Vetting
 - In response to a question about ensuring only legitimate organizations are listed, Find Help's in-house curation team reviews all programs at least once or twice annually to screen out spam websites and illegitimate listings. Programs must be free or reduced-cost and available to the general public to qualify.
 - CBO Accounts and Terms of Service
 - Rather than formal MOUs, organizations create accounts and agree to terms of service committing to use the platform for the benefit of the public and to ensure referrals are addressed. Many organizations from an existing list are already in the Find Help network. The current focus is on a strategy to get those CBOs to claim their listings so they can update program information and set referral preferences, including adding scheduling tools. The plan is to get the first 1,500 organizations claimed and trained before adding the next batch.
 - State Endorsement Layer
 - Nick noted that beyond Find Help's standard vetting, the state will have the ability to add its own badge or tag to listings — signaling recognition by TDVS or Tri-Stars and Stripes — giving veterans an additional layer of confidence in those resources.
 - Platform Launch and Timeline
 - The site could technically go live immediately with Find Help's standard branding, but the team is holding off until specific customizations are in place. Launch remains on track for April 2026. A one-page leave-behind was distributed to Council members.
 - Referral Closure and Monitoring
 - There is no automated closure to avoid prematurely closing referrals where contact was made but the system wasn't updated.
 - Referral closure requires manual action, but the platform has built-in mechanisms to flag and follow up on open referrals past a defined service level agreement window (e.g., 48 hours, 72 hours, or seven days).
 - The state will have a BI (business intelligence) dashboard page for near real-time monitoring of referral activity, allowing staff to track open referrals and intervene if a veteran still needs to be connected to a different organization.
- **Southeast Region State Liaison Office Presentation – Sam Sliney**
 - Presenter Background:
 - Sam introduced herself as a military spouse married to an active duty Army Green Beret, a former Air Force Judge Advocate with 10.5 years of active duty service, currently serving in the Air National Guard since April 2024, and mother of four military-connected children. She noted her entire adulthood has been connected to the Department of Defense in some capacity.
 - Office Mission
 - The Office of State Liaison educates states on military family issues with the goals of enhancing readiness, reducing stress, increasing satisfaction with military life, and supporting recruitment and retention — with a particular focus on retention. The office works with all three branches of state government and operates across all 50

states. Priorities are driven by feedback from the field via an annual Federal Register call for input, input from military services and the National Guard Bureau, and relationships with organizations like Blue Star Families, the National Military Family Association, and veteran service organizations.

- The office uses a regional liaison model. Sam covers the Southeast, which has the largest military population of any region. Liaisons are required to live in their regions and actively visit installations, meet with state councils, and engage legislators.
- 2026 State Policy Priorities
 - Operational Licensure Compacts
 - The Department of Defense has invested \$10 million in 12 licensure compacts, with an additional \$10 million secured under recent legislation. Compacts are the gold standard for licensure portability — 35% of military spouses need occupational licenses to work. Tennessee was noted as licensure compact-friendly (purple on the map, 50–74% of existing compacts enacted) and was identified as a strong candidate to be the first state to reach full adoption.
 - Discussion touched on universal licensure (Arizona's model of exempting the licensure exam for qualifying military spouses) versus compacts. The consensus was that both should be pursued in tandem — universal licensure helps those coming to Tennessee, while compacts help military spouses wherever they move. The December 2024 update to the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act now requires states to recognize out-of-state licenses, though it stops short of requiring states to issue new ones. The Deputy Commissioner noted that the Governor appoints members to 80–85% of Tennessee's licensing boards, which may facilitate movement on this issue.
 - Military Spouse Employment Preference
 - New for 2026. Modeled after existing federal hiring preferences, this would amend Tennessee's existing veterans preference statutes to include military spouses — permissively, not mandatorily — for state and local government hiring, private sector hiring, and government procurement. Kentucky is currently the only Southeast state with a public sector version of this. The Council discussed the economic benefit of getting military spouses into the workforce faster given Tennessee's focus on labor and workforce development.
 - Military Clause in State Family Leave Laws
 - For states that already have a state-level family leave law, this priority seeks to add a military extension clause allowing spouses to take leave when a service member is being activated, deployed, or reintegrating after combat injury. Data shows spouses choose family over employment when forced to choose, directly impacting family economic stability. Sam noted she has not yet researched whether Tennessee has the underlying state leave architecture needed for this to apply.
 - Solutions for Military Homeschoolers
 - New for 2026. Military families homeschool at nearly twice the civilian rate due to frequent moves. Priorities include a 30-day grace period to come into compliance with state homeschool laws after a PCS move, access to

extracurricular and interscholastic activities, and clarification of JROTC eligibility for homeschooled students.

- State Exemption for DoD Family Child Care Homes
 - Seeks to exempt DoD-certified in-home child care providers on base from also needing a state license when the two certification processes are largely duplicative. Currently, spouses must be dual-certified, creating delays that affect both family income and military families' access to child care. 26 states have enacted this exemption.
- Special Needs Education
 - Military-connected children with IEPs or 504 plans face disruptions every time they move. Priorities include seamless IEP/504 transfer within 30 days, enhanced parental consent and involvement, and reduced burden on families to re-prove eligibility at each new school. Families have reported waiting 6–8 months for special education services after enrollment.
- Michigan 3 Compact Policy Enhancements
 - Based on a Penn State study commissioned by the office examining the implementation of the Military Interstate Children's Compact (all 50 states are party to it). Recommendations include strengthening advanced enrollment processes, building out Purple Star Schools programs, improving school-family communication, and creating central repositories and points of contact at the state or district level so families can find information and get questions answered.
- Military Student Identifier
 - Students should be asked at enrollment whether they are military-connected and tagged accordingly. This data enables targeted funding, staffing, and support for the school districts with the highest military-connected populations. General Ross noted Tennessee has had this identifier in place for several years. Sam noted she has not yet completed her research on Tennessee's current status on this item.
- Open Enrollment Flexibility / Military Stability Provision
 - A proposed clause to be added to Tennessee's existing advanced enrollment statute allowing military children to enroll in their anticipated permanent school district rather than temporary housing school district, with up to one full school year to establish permanent residency. 23 states have enacted a version of this. Addresses both housing shortage challenges and educational disruption caused by moving from temporary to permanent housing after a PCS.
- Concurrent Juvenile Jurisdiction
 - On federal exclusive jurisdiction installations like Fort Campbell, minors who commit offenses are currently subject to federal court, which has no juvenile justice system. This results in either adult-level charges or no consequences at all. The proposal asks states to examine their concurrent jurisdiction statutes to allow these cases to be handled in the state juvenile justice system so youth have access to rehabilitation and deterrence mechanisms.
- Military Interpersonal Violence / Information Sharing
 - Military Protective Orders (MPOs) – Information Sharing Gap
 - There is a significant gap in how military protective orders interact with civilian law enforcement. Key issues:

- Local law enforcement can see an MPO in the system but cannot enforce it — MPOs are only enforceable by the military.
 - There is no requirement for local law enforcement to notify military law enforcement when a suspected violation occurs.
 - This has resulted in situations where incidents happen in the civilian sector, the military installation is never informed, and over time the situation escalates — sometimes with serious consequences.
 - Proposed Legislative Remedy
 - Two state-level policy changes were proposed:
 - Enhanced information sharing provision — A state code requirement that local law enforcement notify the military law enforcement agency that issued the MPO when a suspected violation is observed.
 - MPO admissibility at TRO hearings — Allow military protective orders to be presented as evidence at temporary restraining order hearings. Many victims mistakenly believe an MPO is sufficient on its own and never seek a civilian order. The goal is to educate victims, judges, and prosecutors that both can and should be pursued simultaneously.
 - Military Community Representation on State Defense Councils
 - Tennessee meets this priority, which calls for ensuring all relevant stakeholders are included in discussions about supporting service members and their families. Sam noted the dialogue at today's meeting as a strong example of the collaborative model the Department of Defense encourages to avoid information silos across federal, state, and local levels.
 - Closing Discussion
 - Nick thanked Sam for the presentation and acknowledged that while Tennessee has made real progress, the presentation highlighted meaningful areas for improvement — noting it is a marathon, not a sprint.
 - Major General Ross noted he is meeting with Sam the following day and highlighted that Tennessee's military student identifier has been in place for several years, already helping districts better serve military-connected students.
 - Ralph added that the priorities presented were well-chosen, as each one reflects a real gap in Tennessee that needs to be addressed.
 - Guest Remarks – Ed Harries, Executive Director, Tennessee State Veterans Homes
 - Director Harries was introduced and provided a brief overview of the Tennessee State Veterans Homes program.
 - Current Facilities
 - Five homes are currently operating in Murfreesboro, Clarksville, Humboldt, Cleveland, and Knoxville. A sixth location in Arlington is nearing completion — approximately a year behind schedule due to construction delays. A final punch list was received the day of the meeting, and spring 2026 is the anticipated opening, though no firm date was given.
 - What Sets the Homes Apart
 - Director Harries emphasized that the Veterans Homes are state-of-the-art skilled nursing facilities — not traditional nursing homes — and extended an open invitation to any Council member who wants a tour.

- Eligibility and Costs
 - 75% of residents must be veterans with an honorable discharge.
 - Veterans with 70% or greater service-connected disability rating: no cost for care. The VA covers all costs, including specialty care outside the program. By comparison, the average nursing home runs approximately \$350 per day.
 - Veterans under 70% service connected: receive \$147 per day toward costs such as Medicare co-pays, private pay, or managed care.
 - Spouses may be admitted as long as they represent 25% or less of the census. They do not receive a veteran benefit and typically enter under Medicare or private pay.
 - The homes accept Medicare, Medicaid, and most managed care insurance plans.
- Vacancies and Gaps in Coverage
 - Vacancies exist across all five operating facilities. Murfreesboro has a significant number of openings, and data shows very few veteran admissions have come from the Nashville area over the past 20 years — representing a clear unmet need for long-term care in that region.
 - The Tri-Cities area is also currently unserved. A new approximately 108-bed facility is being explored for that region, pending funding and land acquisition.
- Pet Visits
 - The homes welcome pet visits. All animals are permitted except reptiles and primates, per CMS regulations. At least one location has a robotic cat for residents.

Announcements:

- **TDVS Announcements**

- Veteran Ready Business Recognition Program Symposium, Clarksville — the third across the state — will be held in conjunction with Tri-Stars and Stripes. Council members were encouraged to stay an extra night to attend. Registration information to be distributed.
 - April 22, 2025 from 11:00am – 12:30pm
 - Freedom Point at Liberty Park
250 Marina Way
Clarksville, TN 37040
- 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 Veterans Connect Platform
- Prepare for the release of the TN Comptroller's comprehensive report on benefits and services for SMVF

- **Upcoming Meeting Date Proposed:** April 21, 2026

- The next quarterly Council meeting will be held in Clarksville, likely on Fort Campbell. Planned activities include a visit with the Commanding General or members of his staff, a tour of the new Wings of Liberty Museum, and the Veterans Connect Platform rollout. Additional confirmed special guests were noted but not announced.

Public Comment Period:

- N/A

Adjourn meeting -