

Title: Veteran's Services Advisory Board

21 Sep 2017



From: Veteran's Agent

Subject: Meeting Minutes

1. The forty-eighth meeting of the Veteran's Services Advisory Board (VSAB) was called to order at 6:00 p.m., 21 September 2017, in the Selectmen's office.

**2. Members in attendance were:**

Mr. Ray Janke	Mr. Vincent Viglione
Mr. Bill McClure	Ms. Jan Jourdain
Selectman Archie Archible	Mr. Robert Vigneault
Mr. Joe Currier	

**Members Absent were:**

Mr. Bill Bowen  
Mr. Larry Raines  
Mr. Anthony McAvoy

**3. Old Business:**

a. Selectman Archible reported that the ESGR issue is still being worked.

**(OPEN)**

b. The past Memorial Day event was reviewed. **(CLOSED)**

c. Mr. Bowen's Face book/Town Information technology issue is still open.

**(OPEN)**

**4. New Business:**

a. We reviewed the upcoming Veteran's Day activities and agenda. We still need a speaker and chaplain. **(OPEN)**

b. We reviewed the VA Budget cuts. **(CLOSED)**

c. We reviewed the Holyoke Soldiers Home issues. **(CLOSED)**

**5. Public Input/Concerns/Comments: None**

**6. Good of the VSAB:**

a. There was an open discussion about the issue of the poor sound system on the Town Common for our events. This issue also affects all functions on the common. Individual members will take this as a tasking to pursue options. **(OPEN)**.

7. The meeting adjourned at 6:35 p.m. All documents that were provided during the meeting will be attached to the original minutes on file in the Town Clerk's office. The next meeting is scheduled for 19 October 2017 at 6:00 pm.

Vincent Viglione  
VSAB Recording Secretary

Approved

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ray Janke". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "R" and a long, sweeping underline.

Ray Janke  
Veteran's Service Agent  
Co-Chairperson

Cc: Town Clerk  
Town Administrator  
Board of Selectman  
Committee members



## Veterans' Services Advisory Board Meeting Notice



**Meeting Date: 9-21-2017**

**Time: 6:00 pm**

**Location: Selectmen's Meeting Room**

**Agenda:**

- #1 Old Business
  - #1a VSAB Statement of Support for ESGR Program update *ongoing*
  - #1b Memorial Day review/comments *PA SYSTEM*
- #2 New business
  - #2a Veterans Day planning/coordination for 2017
  - #2b Veterans Day press release review
- #3 Public input/concerns
- #4 Good of the VSAB

**For Immediate Release  
October 20, 2017**

**Contact: Ray Janke  
Phone: 413-323-0409**

**\*\*\*Press Advisory\*\*\***

**2017 Belchertown Veterans' Day Events:**

Belchertown Veterans' Day Ceremony set for Saturday, November 11, 2017

The Belchertown Veterans' Agent announces the 2017 Veterans' Day ceremonies will take place on Saturday, November 11, 2017. The Town ceremony will start at 9:30 am taking place at the Town Common to honor the veterans who are memorialized there. At 11:00 am there will be a ceremony in Veterans' Memorial Auditorium at Belchertown High School to honor all veterans. All citizens of Belchertown and the surrounding communities, especially all those who have served in the military and/or the merchant marines, are invited to attend to pay tribute to our veterans. The Chestnut Hill Community School Band and Chorus will perform. Guest speaker will be XXXX X XXXXX, 439th Mission Support Group Commander at Westover ARB. Light refreshments will be served after the ceremony.

Veterans' Day, originally Armistice Day, is a day established by the U.S. Congress as a national holiday to honor all Americans who have served in the U.S. military at any time, not just during a period of war. On this day Americans thank all living and deceased veterans for their sacrifices and service to their country.

Also, please attend the Belchertown High School Veterans' Day assembly honoring our veterans in the auditorium on November XX, 2017 starting at 9:15a.m.

IAW email from Corrina Smith's email dated 11/3/2016

## VETERANS DAY PROGRAM

- ✦ 90-120 days in advance: send invitations to all government (federal, state, local) officials to attend.
- ✦ 60-90 days in advance: procure guest speaker. Coordinate with B'town HS/Superintendent re: need of auditorium, coffee (Large pot), juice (5 gallon container), and janitorial cost...
- ✦ 30-60 days in advance: coordinate with B'town Police, EMS, A.L. Auxiliary for food distribution
- ✦ 1 and 2 weeks in advance: run articles in The Sentinel, Gazette, Republican. (TV stations too; channel 22, 40, and 5)

## DAY' PROGRAM

**0900:** Gathering at the Town common for a short ceremony.

**0930:** Start short ceremony at the Town common to remember and salute the veterans no longer present because of their supreme sacrifice. (Flag full staffed, short speech: Today we give thanks for the Veterans that gave their lives/are fallen...and, TAPS played)

AT BHS AUDITORIUM 11:11 a.m. SHARP--4 rings of bell

- ★ MC—"Please Stand and remove your hats", commands "Present the Colors", Colors, EXCEPT BRANCH FLAGS proceed (in formation at right shoulder arms) from rear of auditorium to station in formation in front of stage. Color Guard remains at attention at right shoulder arms.
- ★ "STAR SPANGLED BANNER"-CHCS Band
- ★ Opening prayer- Belchertown clergy
- ★ MC- "Please join together in our Pledge of Allegiance"--
- ★ MC command "Secure the Colors". Colors placed in floor stands, Color Guard retires to seats. MC- "Please be seated"
- ★ MC acknowledges dignitaries in attendance:
- ★ MC opening statement
- ★ Presentation and stationing of U.S. Military SERVICE FLAGS.
  - MC invites veterans in audience--"Today we join together as a family in thanks to those that answered the call of their country to serve in military service. At this time I would like to introduce some of these Americans. I ask that if you served in the service of the flag presented as its song begins, please stand, and remain standing, as the CHCS choir under the direction of **Mr. Josh Guerraz** sings "The Armed Forces Medley" and the service flags are stationed."
  - Choir Song-US military branch song medley w/ branch flags stationed. Song Order; 1.US Army, 2.USMC, 3.US Navy, 4.USAF, 5.USCG, 6. Merchant Marine  
(Correct formal order to station/position flags: 1.US Army, 2.USMC, 3.US Navy, 4.USAF, 5.USCG, 6. Merchant Marine)
  - Pause—MC —"Lest we forget- there is one more flag, please stand"
    - Song- "**AMAZING GRACE**", POW/MIA flag stationed UNANNOUNCED
- ★ MC invites audience to stand and join together in singing - "GOD BLESS AMERICA"
- ★ MC "Please be seated"
- ★ MC's- introduction of CHCS band- under the direction of **Mr. Jason Mosall** praise/thanks
- ★ MC introduces Guest speaker: Colonel Karen L. Magnus, 439th Mission Support Group Commander at Westover ARB
- ★ MC Closing and thanks. Invitation to refreshments in cafeteria served by members of the Belchertown Veterans Council.
- ★ Closing prayer- by Belchertown clergy
- ★ MC--"Color Guard, station to Colors"
- ★ MC —"retire the colors" (Color Guard depart auditorium with flags).
- ★ Departing song by the CHCS choir.

Estimated time of ceremony 45-60 minutes

# VETERANS' DAY CEREMONY

## ORDER OF EVENTS

### BELCHERTOWN HIGH SCHOOL VETERAN'S MEMORIAL AUDITORIUM

Saturday, NOVEMBER 11, 2017

- 11:00 AM RINGING OF THE BELL
- POSTING OF THE COLORS
- "STAR SPANGLED BANNER" – CHCS Band directed by Mr. Jason Mosall
- INVOCATION PRAYER – Reverend XXXX, I shall offer prayer.
- PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE
- OPENING REMARKS – Ray Janke, Belchertown Veterans' Agent
- Any Government Officials: XXX opening remarks
- ARMED FORCES MEDLEY – CHCS Chorus directed by Mr. Josh Guerraz
  - PRESENTATION OF SERVICE FLAGS
- "AMAZING GRACE" – CHCS Chorus
  - PRESENTATION OF MIA FLAG
- Any Government Officials: XXX additional remarks
- "GOD BLESS AMERICA" – CHCS BAND
- KEYNOTE SPEAKER – XXXX X XXXXX, 439th Mission Support Group Commander at Westover ARB
- "SALUTE TO AMERICA" Combined CHCS Band & CHORUS
- BENEDICTION – Reverend XXXX, I shall offer prayer.
- CLOSING REMARKS – Ray Janke
- RETRIEVAL OF COLORS

*Estimated time of ceremony 45-60 minutes*

## Budget Calls for Cuts to VA Programs as Tradeoff for Extending Choice



ILLUSTRATION BY SEAN MOORES/STARS AND STRIPES

Stars and Stripes | 23 May 2017 | By Nikki Wentling

WASHINGTON – President Donald Trump's budget released Tuesday proposes cutting monthly stipends to some disabled, unemployed veterans and reducing veterans' cost-of-living adjustments as offsets to continue a program that allows veterans to seek care outside the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The \$186.5 billion budget calls for \$2.9 billion in new spending in fiscal 2018, which begins Oct. 1, to fund the Veterans Choice Program, which was created as a temporary measure and allows veterans, in certain instances, to seek health care in the private sector at the VA's expense. Trump's budget also asks for \$3.5 billion more for the program in 2019 and every subsequent year.

The increase would bring the total amount that the VA spends through its various community care programs to \$13.2 billion in fiscal 2018.

The Choice program -- created in response to the system-wide scandal of veterans suffering long waits for health care -- was set to end Aug. 7, 2017. Congress passed legislation in April allowing it to continue beyond the expiration date with the approximately \$1 billion remaining of \$10 billion appropriated for the program in 2014.

It's now authorized to continue until it runs out of money. VA Secretary David Shulkin is working on improvements to the program, which has been criticized by veterans and lawmakers as confusing and complex.

"Veterans' access to timely, high-quality health care is one of this administration's highest priorities," the budget states. "The budget provides mandatory funding to extend the Veterans Choice Program, enabling eligible veterans to receive timely care, close to home."

Listed as one of the offsets for the extra cost is a new restriction on compensation for veterans through the VA's "**individual unemployability**" program.

*Currently, veterans eligible for the program have a 60 to 100 percent disability rating through the VA and are unable to secure a job because of their service-connected disability. The program allows them to get paid at the highest compensation rate. For 2017, the monthly rate for a 100 percent disabled veteran living alone is \$2,915 per month.*

The change, which the budget describes as a "modernization," **would stop the higher payments once a veteran who is eligible for Social Security payments reaches the minimum age** to receive them. Veterans who have already reached the age to receive Social Security would be removed from the VA benefit program if Congress approves the proposal.

The change would save \$3.2 billion for the VA in fiscal 2018, according to budget documents.

Also listed as an offset to the Choice program **is a practice to round down cost-of-living adjustments to all veterans who receive disability compensation**. The practice was standard until 2013.

The Office of Management and Budget estimates reinstating **the round-down policy would decrease payments by a total of \$12 annually per veteran**. It would save \$20 million for the VA in fiscal 2018, the documents show.

The last offset would be to cap student veterans' Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits for flight training. Flight programs tend to be more expensive than other courses of study, the budget states. It proposes capping **benefits for flight training** at the maximum the VA will provide to students at private schools, which is about \$21,000 each year. The cap would save \$42 million for the VA for fiscal 2018, according to the budget.

"Through these tradeoffs, VA will focus its budgetary resources on providing veterans with the most efficient and effective care and benefits," the budget reads.

In total, the president's budget calls for \$82.1 billion in discretionary spending for the VA, an increase of about 6 percent from fiscal 2017. Once mandated funding is included, the budget surpasses \$186 billion.

If passed by Congress, the VA's budget would be another in a succession of increases for the agency. When former President Barack Obama took office in 2008, the VA budget was about \$90 billion. In 2012, it was \$130 billion.

Shulkin said at a congressional hearing earlier this month that he would not be seeking a budget increase for the VA in future years, but needed one in fiscal 2018 for modernization efforts.

He is set to testify about the budget Wednesday morning before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs.

"The 2018 budget request reflects the strong commitment of the president to provide the services and benefits that our nation's veterans have earned," Shulkin said in a statement issued Wednesday. "VA has made significant progress in improving its service to veterans and their family members. We are fully committed to continuing the transformation across the department, so we can deliver the standards of performance our veterans expect and deserve."



# Concerns raised about Holyoke Soldiers Home care and staffing

By [Mike Plaisance](#) Updated on September 10, 2017 at 6:03

**HOLYOKE** -- Employees and a resident of the Holyoke Soldiers' Home have raised concerns about treatment of residents and staff at the state facility, laying out issues ranging from inadequate staffing to a lack of well-being checks on veterans who live in dormitory rooms and an increase in patient falls.

Those concerns were voiced during interviews The Republican conducted with eight employees -- three of whom spoke on the record -- and one resident.

For example, employees said incidents involving patient falls have increased because not enough staff are available to walk veterans to the bathroom and other areas of the facility. In July, employees said, staff recorded 70 falls, with two patients suffering fractured hips. The Republican is seeking state records on falls at the facility over a broader period of time.

A spokesman for the state Department of Veterans Services did not immediately provide records about the number of reported patient falls per month. The Soldiers' Home policies and procedures require written reports documenting all patient falls, the spokesman said. Those reports are reviewed by a team led by the facility's quality manager.

The employees interviewed also said 176 staff members at the Holyoke Soldiers' Home have signed onto an effort called Employees Unite 4 Change. It is described as "a collective staff effort to identify and problem solve a myriad of issues greatly impacting veteran care and the facility as a whole."

They said they have sent a list of issues they believe need to be addressed to Holyoke Soldiers' Home Superintendent Bennett W. Walsh, who held "town hall" meetings with different shifts of staff on Aug. 24.

The Soldiers' Home is a state facility on Cherry Street overlooking Interstate 91 that provides residential beds and inpatient care for veterans, as well as outpatient services. It was founded in 1952.

As of early August, the Holyoke Soldiers' Home had 237 military veterans in long-term care and 25 living in dorms, cared for by a staff of over 300, Walsh said.

## State cancels Holyoke interview

Walsh agreed to meet with The Republican to discuss the concerns voiced by staff and a resident. But the state Department of Veterans Services canceled that meeting, asking a reporter to instead direct questions to an agency spokesman.

The state cited an "only one mouthpiece" rule for canceling the meeting, despite the fact that Walsh has spoken, texted and emailed directly with the newspaper on other matters, including a review in progress by the state auditor's office.

After the meeting was canceled, a spokesman for the Department of Veterans Services offered comments via email.

"The Soldiers' Home in Holyoke takes pride in providing quality care to our aging veterans, and will always thoroughly investigate any allegations of less than exceptional care. We recognize that our ability to continue providing a high level of direct care is contingent upon the professionalism of the valued staff at the home," department spokesman Joe Truschelli wrote.

He added: "Additionally, for future reference, please send any future inquiries for the Soldiers' Home, the Veterans' Cemetery, or the Department of Veterans Services to my attention."

A Springfield native, Walsh retired as a lieutenant colonel after 24 years in the U.S. Marine Corps in 2016, shortly before taking over as superintendent that May. His yearly salary is \$115,000.

### **Employees speak out**

Of the eight employees The Republican spoke to, only three were willing to let their names be used for publication. The others declined to do so because they said they feared reprisals.

The three employees who spoke on the record -- Greg Girolamo, a licensed practical nurse, Debra Ragoonanan, a certified nursing assistant, and Ulises Francisco Suarez, a laundry and cleaning employee -- all confirmed information other employees offered during interviews with The Republican.

Girolamo said staff faces pressure to distribute residents' medications quickly -- an issue because sometimes residents have questions or just want to chat. Speeding through is unkind and risks mistakes, he said.

"You spend time with them because that's the way it should be," Girolamo said. "These guys gave their all for us."

Ragoonanan has worked at the Holyoke Soldiers' Home for 21 years. She decided to speak out because of what she described as rude or shunning treatment from management without explanation, employees' inability to plan for vacations and time off without getting shifts covered, and never knowing day-to-day if overtime will be required.

"I'm going on the record because I'm sick of walking on eggshells. ... It's been hell. We're reaching out to the public for help because we know we can be retaliated against and we're there to help the veterans," Ragoonanan said in an interview at her home in Holyoke.

Suarez and some of the facility's caregivers spoke of cases of residents in the stages of dying asking a staff member, including a laundry employee like Suarez, to spend time with them. But lack of staffing or poorly managed staffing on certain shifts means an employee is diverted from providing such a kindness, he said.

"So he knows you're there. Make sure they're comfortable. Usually they have family but if they don't have family, we step in," Suarez said. "We really are here (speaking out) because the veterans aren't being treated."

The employees described the overtime as being forced. If an employee is on work property and overtime staff is needed, Girolamo said, "You can't go home."

Truschelli, the state spokesman, said the 330 full-timers employed by the Holyoke Soldiers' Home exceeds U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs guidelines. The employees are represented by six unionized bargaining units, he said.

"Each union negotiated and agreed to a comprehensive benefits package, scheduling and scope of work for their employees," he said. "Time off and overtime policies are negotiated and agreed upon between the Soldiers' Home and the bargaining unit."

To date in 2017, no hostile work environment complaints have been filed through the agency's designated diversity officer, the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination or the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, he said.

Families have the opportunity to discuss care at the Holyoke Soldiers' Home through monthly family advocacy meetings, an annual customer care survey and "Evening of Caring" family forums, he said.

The Soldiers' Home is fully accredited by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations and inspected annually by Veterans Affairs. Truschelli said the last accreditation came in June 2016 and the next process for accreditation will take place in 2019.

## Resident seeks answers

David Corriveau, 66, is a U.S. Army veteran and resident of the Soldiers' Home for seven years. During an interview on the gazebo at the Soldiers' Home on Aug. 14, he said he wants to know what happened to his friend, Paul J. Morneau.

Morneau, 81, a U.S. Navy veteran, was found dead in his dorm room at 5:35 p.m. on Aug. 1, according to Walsh. His death was determined to be by natural causes and no autopsy was done, according to Morneau's death certificate.

But Corriveau said Morneau failed to show up as usual for meals or to play bingo in the days before his death. Morneau was seen in the canteen during a meal on July 30, but he didn't look good, Corriveau said.

The position of a social worker, whose duties included spending time in the dorms every day checking on residents, was cut a year ago. The possible lack of medical attention in Morneau's final days is troubling, Corriveau said.

"The checks and balances didn't work this time," Corriveau said.

Asked about Morneau, Truschelli said information about Soldiers' Home patients is confidential and protected by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA).

"It is unlawful for the Home and any of its staff to discuss any patient specifically," Truschelli said.

## Audit in progress

The Republican's interviews took place against the backdrop of a pending state audit report on the findings of review that began in fall 2016 and lasted into this year. Walsh, who began as superintendent in May 2016, said in August he was unaware of any major issues that led to the audit or that the audit has yielded.

"Ours was part of the schedule the auditor's office had previously scheduled," Walsh said.

State officials first announced that State Auditor Suzanne Bump's office would conduct a review of the Holyoke Soldiers' Home after the release of a 2016 audit report on the Chelsea Soldiers' Home, which identified a number of safety and sanitation issues, as well as operational issues with equipment and deteriorating buildings.

In August, Bump spokesman Mike Wessler said he could not comment on the status of the Holyoke audit beyond confirming that it happened. "We put out 100 audits a year, on average, so we put out a lot of audits, and some of them have substantial problems and some of them don't," he said.

Bump's office is also conducting a review of the Department of Veterans Services, according to her statement on the Chelsea audit.

Honorably discharged veterans will be eligible to shop online at the AAF Exchange beginning Veteran's Day - Follow the link below to sign-up:

Great news for those who did not retire from the military and really miss shopping at the PX: Online only! Begins Veteran's Day, but may sign-up now to verify your service, takes 3 mins.

*\** <https://www.shopmyexchange.com/s?Dy=1&Nty=1&Ntt=vosbwelcome> *\**

The image shows the top portion of the AAF Exchange website. At the top left is the logo "EXCHANGE" with the tagline "YOU SAVE, WE GIVE BACK". To the right is a search bar with the placeholder text "Search Keyword or Item #". Further right are icons for "Free Shipping" (with a note "with Military Star and on all orders \$45 or more") and the "MILITARY STAR" logo. Below the search bar is a horizontal navigation menu with categories: Apparel, Handbags & Accessories, Shoes, Jewelry & Watches, Beauty & Health, Baby & Toys, Home & Appliances, Electronics, Sports & Outdoors, Military, Gifts & Food, and More. Below the navigation menu is a large, dark, textured banner with the text "Take The First Step!" in large white letters, followed by "VETERANS ONLINE SHOPPING BENEFIT" in smaller white letters.