

Veterans' Advisory Committee on Education

Meeting Minutes
May 20-21, 2008

The Veterans' Advisory Committee on Education (VACOE) met on May 21, 2008, in Fort Hood, Texas. The Committee reconvened on May 22, 2008, in Austin, Texas.

Members Attending

Mr. James Bombard, Chairman
Mr. James G. Blair
Mr. Colbert Boyd
Dr. Michael Cappeto
Dr. Lynn Boyd
Dr. Jeff Cropsey
Ms. Faith DesLauriers

Ms. Lisa Lutz
Col. Robert Norton (Ret.)
Mr. Joseph Sharpe
Dr. Kathy Snead
Mr. C. Donald Sweeney
Mr. William Sweeney

Members Not Attending

Mr. Patrick Campbell
Mr. Robert Clark
Mr. George Rubin

Veterans Benefits Administration

Ms. Lynn Nelson – Deputy Director, Education Service
Mr. Salminio Garner – Designated Federal Officer
Mr. Barrett Bogue – Alternate, Designated Federal Officer

Tuesday, May 20, 2008

Mr. James Bombard opened the meeting at 9:45 a.m. He welcomed all members and directed their attention to the meeting agenda. He acknowledged and welcomed the Committee's new members and asked them to introduce themselves.

Mr. William Susling and Dr. Lynn Boyd, two new members in attendance, provided an overview of their backgrounds, credentials, and current professional business efforts. They also extended their appreciation for being appointed to the Veterans' Affairs Committee on Education (VACOE).

Review of Minutes

Mr. Bombard asked the Committee to review the minutes from the October 2007 VACOE meeting. The minutes were reviewed and accepted with minor revisions.

Mr. Robert Norton asked that a motion be called to provide a summary of the minutes in the future, rather than continuing to provide detailed minutes. The Committee agreed that from this meeting forward, meeting minutes should not capture the same level of detail as previous minutes, but can be captured in a summary of what took place.

Update on Congressional Action

Mr. Bombard asked members of the Committee who have been involved with the recent activity on Capitol Hill for a summary of the latest action.

Mr. Norton shared with the Committee what he has been privileged to regarding Senate Bill S.22 and the House bill introduced by Representative Herseth-Sandlin.

Mr. Norton noted that S. 22 is getting the most attention on Capitol Hill right now, and that it proposes to create a new GI Bill that will greatly improve the education benefits to our service members. He also stated that the idea of education benefit transferability has also been in the forefront on Capitol Hill.

Town Hall Meeting with Fort Hood Community

Mr. Bombard greeted the town hall meeting attendees, informed them of the Committee's purpose and then requested that the VACOE members introduce themselves and give the audience some information on their background. Mr. Bombard then introduced the Deputy Garrison Commander of Fort Hood, Mr. Andy Bird.

Mr. Bombard asked the town hall meeting attendees to review a questionnaire that was distributed at the meeting and consider if any of the questions were relevant to their personal experiences or circumstances. He also noted that if they had any issues pertaining to their education benefits, they could discuss them at this meeting and the Committee members would do their best to respond.

The Committee members then participated in a question and answer session with the town hall attendees.

A majority of the town hall attendees were very interested in legislation that would allow them to transfer education benefits to their dependents.

Mr. Bombard thanked all those who participated in the town hall meeting and adjourned the meeting for lunch.

Dialogue with Fort Hood Leadership

Mr. Bombard reconvened the meeting and provided Deputy Garrison Commander Andy Bird an opportunity to brief the Committee on the primary tasks of the soldiers assigned to Ft. Hood.

Mr. Bird thanked the Committee for coming to Fort Hood. He then discussed Fort Hood's size, mission, and status as a premier mobilization/demobilization site which out-processes 4,000 soldiers a month. Fort Hood has deployed approximately 300,000 soldiers and currently deploys 6,000 soldiers a day. Mr. Bird noted that Fort Hood is a great place for the Committee to hear the voice of the 21st century service members. Mr. Bird again thanked the Committee and the audience for their participation.

Mr. Bombard thanked Mr. Bird for his briefing.

Discussion of Pending Legislation

Mr. Bombard moved the Committee to the next agenda item—pending legislation overview by Ms. Lynn Nelson. Ms. Nelson provided an overview of S.22, the "Post 9-11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2007"; S.2938, the "Enhancement of Recruitment, Retention, and Readjustment Through Education Act of 2008"; and H.R. 5684, the "Veterans Education Improvement Act of 2008."

Mr. Bombard thanked Ms. Nelson for the overview and moved to the next agenda item—an update of new developments in licensing and certification programs by Ms. Lisa Lutz. Ms. Lutz informed the Committee that the Department of Defense (DoD) and Department of Labor are part of a working group formed to create career pathways to credentialing, expand certification and licensure information, and identify military best practices in aligning training with civilian credentialing to enhance transition to civilian life. Ms. Lutz indicated that the Department of the Navy is taking the lead on credentialing and might host a summit and invite all the branches of service and credentialing organizations to attend.

Mr. Bombard thanked Ms. Lutz for the update and opened the meeting to the public.

The Committee members participated in a question and answer session with the town hall attendees.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:30 p.m.

Wednesday, May 21, 2008

The Committee reconvened at 9:00 a.m. in Austin, Texas.

Town Hall Meeting with Austin, Texas Community

Mr. Bombard opened the meeting and commented on the low attendance of those participating in the town hall meeting. He asked the Committee to consider yesterday's town hall comments.

Mr. Bombard asked the Committee to review the last letter the Committee sent to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. He also asked the Committee to review the draft letter that should be sent to all institutions of higher learning (IHL) regarding outreach activities. It was noted that the Secretary has not responded to the Committee's recommendations or the letter to the IHLs.

The Committee members continued discussions regarding the percentage of soldiers who are attending online distance learning, the continued interest in transferability from the soldiers, and the belief that S.22 did not address the needs of soldiers of today.

Mr. Bombard thanked the Committee and opened the meeting to the public.

Members of the public commented on the lack of interest from Army leadership and its soldiers to attend Transition Assistance Program briefings, and the problems concerning the need to maintain funding levels for State Approving Agencies to fulfill their role for the VA.

Mr. Bombard recommended that a working group be formed to explore ways to improve outreach opportunities to tell veterans about new educational opportunities.

New Business

The Committee discussed new business. Members informed the Committee that the Servicemember Opportunity Colleges Organization developed a draft of a survey that would be sent to the campus presidents is completed. The survey will be sent to the top 300 schools listed on the National Center for Education Statistics web site.

The Committee recommended and agreed that because of S.22, there should be three VACOE meetings held during fiscal year 2008.

The Committee entered Executive Session at 11:40 a.m. The public was excluded and no minutes were taken.

The Committee reconvened at 12:00 p.m.

Recommendations

Mr. Bombard asked the Committee to form their recommendations which were:

Recommendation #1 – VA provide material and subject matter experts from both Education Service Outreach and Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment to the VACOE, and convey the need for VA to increase outreach efforts using all media formats to improve advertising.

Recommendation #2 – Increase resources for Education Service to be prepared for improvements to education programs due to pending legislation.

Recommendation #3 – Modernize information technology systems to move toward a virtual VA that will ultimately improved education benefit delivery.

Recommendation #4 – DoD use the Army Knowledge Online web site test certification system to inform active duty and reserve personnel of the MGIB and simultaneously inform veterans of education programs and eligibility criteria. VA should assist in the development of criteria for this test.

Recommendation #5 – Establish equity between those beneficiaries who use the MGIB, including those who attend less than half time.

Recommendation #6 – Ensure education benefits are available to all beneficiaries regardless of the mode of learning, which includes distance learning.

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James Bombard, Chair

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Salminio, Garner, Recorder

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