

**DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)**  
**VETERANS' ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON REHABILITATION (VACOR)**  
COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES - September 16 - 17, 2024

**Monday, September 16, 2024:** VA Puget Sound Health Care System  
1660 S. Columbian Way, Seattle, WA 98108

**Tuesday, September 17, 2024:** VA Seattle Regional Office Federal Building  
915 Second Avenue, Seattle, WA 98174  
Hybrid Meeting

**ATTENDEES**

**Committee Members Present:**

- |                                       |                        |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Mr. Robert Hines-Chair<br>Designee | 5. Mr. Lawrence Rhone  |
| 2. Dr. John Milam                     | 6. Mr. Robert Hamilton |
| 3. Mr. Nate Todd                      | 7. Dr. James McRavian  |
| 4. Mr. Luis Echeverria Newberry       |                        |

**Ex-Officio Members:**

- Ms. Jessica Davis
- Dr. Kristi Hill
- Dr. Lisa Ottomanelli
- Mr. Michael Heaney (absent)
- Mr. Nick Pamperin (absent)

**Department of Veterans Affairs Staff Present:**

- Ms. Latrese Thompson, Designated Federal Officer (DFO)
- Ms. Kristina Olson, Alternate DFO
- Mr. David Smith, Alternate DFO
- Ms. Kristine Kuehnle, Assistant Director of Program and Policy with Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) Service
- Ms. Veronica Brown, Supervisor of Field Services with VR&E Service
- Dr. LaTonya Small, Program Specialist with the Advisory Management Committee Office

**Public attendees:**

1. Dr. Michelle Peterson (pending committee reappointment)
2. Dr. Christiana Dillahunt-Aspillaga (pending committee reappointment)
3. Dr. Terri K. Pogoda (pending committee reappointment)
4. Ms. Tiffany Drain (pending committee reappointment)
5. Dr. Franco Santos (pending committee reappointment)
6. Ms. Sidath Panangala (Congressional Research Service)
7. Mike Korman (Veteran)

**Monday, September 16, 2024**

**Welcome:**

Ms. Latrese Thompson, DFO, called the Committee to order at 8:15 a.m. (PST) with the Rules of Engagement. Mr. Robert Hines, Chair Designee, proceeded with a roll call of members present and an overview of the agenda.

**VACOR Puget Sound Briefings:**

**Dr. LaTonya Small, Advisory Committee Management Office**, provided Federal Advisory Committee Act updates.

**Mr. Howard “Ben” Nabbefeld, Supervisor Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor with Compensated Work Therapy**, provided an overview of Puget Sound Vocational Rehabilitation Services programs; Transitional Work, IPS Supported Employment (SE), Community Based Employment Services and Vocational Assistance.

**Dr. Kevin Hakimi, Chief of Rehabilitation Care Service**, provided an overview of the extensive support available to Veterans, individual and group counseling, assistance with VA benefits and outreach through Mobile Vet Centers. Challenges of the increasing workload and the need for staff growth due to the rising demand for services, particularly in therapy and audiology, were highlighted. Additionally, the presentation examined the considerations surrounding community care and emphasized the significance of collaboration among departments to enhance Veteran care.

**Dr. Scott Campea, Director of Inpatient Rehabilitation**, provided an overview of the department’s comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach to patient care. The program offers intensive rehabilitation services for individuals recovering from conditions such as stroke, brain injury and spinal cord injury, featuring a coordinated team of specialists who deliver personalized care. Dr. Campea highlighted unique services that differentiate the program, showcasing specialized equipment and innovative therapy techniques aimed at enhancing patients' functional independence and quality of life during their recovery journey.

**Ms. Mary Harrison, Director of Blind Rehabilitation**, provided an overview of the Blind and Low-Vision Rehabilitation program, detailing how rehabilitation services are delivered to Veterans with visual impairments. The program offers a comprehensive range of care, from individualized assessments and treatment planning to training in adaptive skills for daily living, orientation and mobility training and vocational rehabilitation services. With an interdisciplinary approach involving various specialists, the program aims to help Veterans maintain independence and improve their quality of life, whether through inpatient programs at rehabilitation centers for the

blind or outpatient services closer to their homes.

**The VA Puget Sound Health Care System (PSHCS) Executive Leadership Team** provided an overview of VA PSHCS key services and initiatives. VA PSHCS prioritizes mental health services and operates the largest Women's Health program in the region. It is also the second largest community service provider for the homeless and offers telehealth services to enhance accessibility. Additionally, PSHCS is leading in innovation with advancements like 3D printing for prosthetics. Throughout these efforts, the organization remains dedicated to serving Veterans and delivering exceptional customer service.

**Dr. Aaron Turner, Director of Rehabilitation Psychology**, provided an overview of PSHCS's Polytrauma, Traumatic Brain Injuries, and Rehabilitation Psychology departments. The discussion focused on monitoring wait times for new polytrauma patients and highlighted challenges with telehealth services in rural areas. Efforts are underway to integrate whole health approaches into polytrauma care; however, high turnover rates among providers complicate staffing consistency. Dr. Turner emphasized the role of rehabilitation psychology in improving access and quality of care for patients.

**Dr. Stephen Burns, Director of Spinal Cord Injury**, provided an overview of the Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) program at VA PSHCS, highlighting its commitment to offering a full range of clinically appropriate services. Currently, SCI care is delivered face-to-face, which limits accessibility for some Veterans, and there are no subacute rehabilitation services available for SCI patients. To enhance patient satisfaction, the program has initiated a quality improvement survey aimed at identifying areas for improvement. Moving forward, the program may benefit from considering telehealth options and the introduction of subacute rehabilitation services based on survey feedback.

**Ms. Kelly Walling, Prosthetics, and Dr. Rebecca Speckman, Amputation Care**, provided an overview of their services, focusing on the challenges currently faced in staffing due to the transition to the new Electronic Health Record Modernization (EHRM) system. This transition has introduced complexities that impact service delivery and patient care, necessitating ongoing efforts for process optimization. While the department aims to provide comprehensive care for amputees, including prosthetic fittings and rehabilitation services, addressing staffing issues and streamlining EHRM processes will be essential for improving efficiency and enhancing patient outcomes moving forward.

**Public Comments:** None

**Committee Discussion:** VACOR members discussed the briefings and tour. Highlighted issues were discussed for further assessment of VA rehabilitation programs.

- VACOR comments: The Compensated Work Therapy program - VA Marketing is not reaching enough Veterans. No additional staff needed due to an average of 15 Veterans per staff with a 25 Veteran capacity caseload. Marketing with partnering organizations, increase social media, relationship management and Veteran Experience Office (VEO) collaboration. VACOR requests a VEO visit to identify how they can assist with marketing VHA programs.
- VACOR comments: Prosthetics program recommendation for standard operating procedures for VA and community care referrals and Veteran point of contacts. Prosthetics and amputation care units should initiate customer satisfaction report/survey reviews to support the stated demand for additional staff. The members discussed Veterans receiving system notifications that their referral has been picked up or an automated explanation as to why not within a certain number of days (ex: 14-30 days still pending). VHA should consider an electronic tool to send out Veteran reminders or status update (i.e. community care referral statuses).
- VACOR tour observation: SCI beds and staffing, antique quarters with four patients per room vs. private rooms, analyze survey four areas with customer satisfaction results under 80%.

Fiscal year 2025 field visit location: VACOR is interested in visiting a location where access to care is limited due to geographical constraints such as Puerto Rico, New Mexico or VHA VISN -16 sites in Arkansas, Louisiana or Texas (Houston).

The Committee adjourned the meeting at 3:30 p.m. (PST).

**Tuesday, September 17, 2024**

**Welcome:**

Ms. Latrese Thompson, DFO, called the Committee meeting to order at 8:30 a.m. (PST). Mr. Robert Hines, Chair Designee, proceeded with a roll call of members present and a review of the agenda. Ms. Chantile Stovall, Assistant Director for the Seattle Regional Office (RO) welcomed the Committee and provided leadership introductions.

The Seattle RO serves over 500,000 Veterans. Mr. Hines gave a brief overview of VACOR.

Ms. Chantile Stovall led the Committee on a tour of the Seattle RO.

**VACOR: Seattle RO Briefings:**

**Mr. Steve Strobe, Veterans Service Center Manager**, provided an overview of the RO's Veterans Service Center. Mr. Strobe briefed on RO partnerships with the Washington State Department of Corrections. Mr. Strobe gave an overview of the Warrior Training Advancement Course and the department's efforts in homelessness outreach in the local Seattle area.

**Ms. Beorn Kjeldsen, Special Mission Program Officer**, provided an overview of the Disability Rating Activity unit. Ms. Kjeldsen discussed the Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES), Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) and unprogrammed losses. The Seattle has received over 25,000 IDES claims and 50,000 BDD claims this year.

**Ms. Chantile Stovall, Ms. Kelly Gardner, Assistant Service Center Manager, Ms. Margaret Shartel, Change Management Analyst and Ms. Megan Hudson, Human Resource Liaison**, provided an overview of partnerships and outreach conducted by the Seattle RO. Briefing on the RO's partnerships with the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Health Administration, Community Outreach/Claims Clinics, and Tribal Outreach Recruitment. Community outreach has increased claim submissions by 20,000. The RO's Tribal Outreach team has attended 800 events this fiscal year. Seattle RO has 115,000 staff with 48% being Veterans. Human Resources promotes recruitment of Veterans.

**Ms. Karolyn Hannem, VR&E Officer**, provided a brief overview of the VR&E program. The VR&E panel answered questions from the Committee members related to job placement, apprenticeships and the Non-Paid Work Experience (NPWE) program. There was a discussion on when it was appropriate for VR&E benefits to support advanced training and degrees. The RO and committee discussed the NPWE name benefits and challenges. The name NPWE is confusing to Veterans since non-paid does

not mean that they will not receive subsistence allowance. Discussion included the topic of considering background screening for VR&E participants as part of their initial evaluation, especially Veterans seeking public trust and/or clearance required occupations.

**Public Comments:** None

**Committee Discussion:**

Committee continued to discuss highlights from Monday and Tuesday.  
Next Field Visit Site is selected for April 2025: San Juan, Puerto Rico  
The Committee adjourned at 1:05 p.m. (PST).

**Submitted:**

/s/Mr. Robert K. Hines  
VACOR Chair

/s/Ms. Latrese Thompson  
Designated Federal Officer  
10/31/2024