

Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation Commission

Saturday April 10, 2021

The Department of Illinois Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation Commission met at Legion headquarters in Bloomington, Illinois on April 10, 2021. The meeting was called to order at 10:00, and the pledge of allegiance was recited. The following members were present:

Rodger Bennett (4th Div.) Chairman
Tom Nebgen (3rd Div.) Vice Chairman
Raymond Toczek (1st Div.)
Stephen Wylie (5th Div.)
Ashley "Dave" Davis (2nd Div.)

Minutes of the last meeting were approved as published.

Toczek gave an update on the Chicago VA&R office. The VA closed the Regional Office in mid-March 2020, and all the Veterans Service Organizations had to close too. They are co-located in that building. All Service Officers have been working from home. Calls and e-mails are retrieved and responded to as appropriate. There have been no face-to-face interviews. Regardless, due to modern technology, they can and have still been submitting claims electronically, and have the systems which allow them to sign forms online.

The VA is slowly reopening the Regional Office. Veterans can call 312-980-4470 to schedule a one-hour appointment. The Veteran Service Organizations have been allowed to have 2-3 employees come into their offices. If the metrics go well, the building may be back to normal by summertime.

Biggest problems with the lock down are C&P exams. At first none were being performed, which caused a large back up. Also, certain facilities, like the National Personnel Records Center, were not open, so old Service Treatment Records could not be accessed. Finally, personal and video hearings were stopped. As of now, C&P exams and zoom hearings are being scheduled, but it will take months to catch up on the backlog. The National Records Center has reopened and are working on their backlog.

COVID also took its toll on the staff. Both the Dept. Service Officer, Carolina Contreras, and our new hire, Johnny Gonzalez, resigned. That leaves one full-time Service Officer, Bill Slider (@ Marion VHA), and two part-timers, Ray Toczek and Wayne Macejak, to handle the work load. Dept. has been interviewing prospective new service officers and we hope to get them on board soon. It will take a minimum of 4-6 months to train.

Co-payment bills at the hospitals and clinics (for those veterans who must make a co-payment), are not being mailed since April of last year. However, fees are still being accrued! Veterans who wish to pay, can check with their medical center billing and find out their current balance. There are rumors floating that these bills will be waived but nothing in writing yet.

The new Veterans Home in Chicago has been landscaped and the staff hired. We are just waiting for the first residents to be accepted. Veterans wishing to get on the waiting list should contact their local Illinois Dept. of Veterans Affairs office. All VA hospitals are giving out COVID shots to all vets and recently, to their spouses.

The Dept. Commander, Roy Weber Sr. Vice Commander Wayne Fischer, stopped in to greet us. They thanked us for coming down to the meeting. Both emphasized membership and that, as of today, the state convention is a go.

Three new Agent Orange presumptive conditions have been added to the long list. They are bladder cancer, hypothyroidism, and Parkinsonism and/or Parkinsonism like symptoms. Vets who were exposed, can now apply for compensation. If you are aware of any Vietnam veteran who died of the above conditions, and there is a surviving spouse, that person should apply for survivors' benefits.

Budget was discussed, motion made and passed as follows:

DC conference \$3000. If all five members attend it would be \$600 per member, if 4, then \$750, 3 would be \$1000. If only 1 or 2 attends, the cap would be \$1,500.
\$900 for three meetings; 3 per diems @ \$105=\$315; \$40 postage and \$60 meals.
Total budget. \$4,315.

Having no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 10:45. The next meeting will be held July 14th, 2021.

Respectfully submitted,

Raymond P. Toczek
Secretary, VA&R Commission