

STATE OF WASHINGTON

VETERANS AFFAIRS ADVISORY COMMITTEE

*PO BOX 41150*  *Olympia, Washington 98504-1150*  *360-725-2167*

**Meeting Minutes**

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| **Meeting attended by**  **(VAAC Member)** | Charles Wharton |
| **Date** | October 20, 2016 |
| **Time** | 10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. |
| **Location** | American Legion Post #7  1688 W. Bakerview Road, Bellingham, WA |
| **Call to Order** | Meeting called to order by Charles Wharton  Invocation by Charles Wharton  Pledge of Allegiance by everyone |
| **Welcome & Introductions:** | Welcome and Introduction done by Charles Wharton |
| **Presentations** | **WDVA Update – Gary Condra, Deputy Director**  WDVA continues to work with our community partners for transitioning service members. A 3 days Soldier for Life Summit was held last week at JBLM. The summit had brought together key federal and state agencies, influential military leaders, innovators in the business and employer community and local community leaders with transitioning service members, veterans and their families. The summit featured seminars, roundtables, panel events, recruiter training and facilitated discussions focused on improving competitive employment for service members, veterans and spouses in additional to networking opportunities.  Veterans Employee Resource Group (VERG) – This group help integrate the experience, values and knowledge of both veterans and service members in state employment. The VERG supports former and active duty personnel and their families through a system of comprehensive activities and developmental opportunities.  YesVets - The YesVets Hiring initiative is the outcome of House Bill 2040 sponsored by Representative Gina McCabe during the 2015 Legislative Session. YesVets encourages businesses in Washington State to hire veterans and to improve veterans employment rate overall. Hiring veterans is good for our state businesses and it is also good for our country. YesVets launched last February and to date 524 veterans was hired and there are 365 employers participating. Staff members within the Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs, Employment Security Department, and Governor’s Office, as well as several chambers of commerce, local associations and volunteers! Any employer can commit to hiring a veteran by signing up for YesVets at [www.yesvets.org](http://www.yesvets.org).  Veterans Homelessness – Because of the rising cost of rent and the lack of housing stock in various counties a lot of individuals have been forced out of their home as they could no longer afford the cost of rent. Our agency is working closely with various federal and state government agencies as well as non-profit organizations to find innovative ways to increase housing stock and appealing to landlords to set aside several units in their apartment complex for veterans.  **Community Update – Terry Bornemman – Bellingham Pro Term Mayor**  The City of Bellingham is doing their part in assisting veterans and their families that lives in the city. The city offers reduce bus passes, reduce museum admissions for those that qualifies.  **Whatcom County Veterans Program – Elizabeth Harmon-Craig**  The County Veterans Programs serves a point of entry to local, state and federal benefits and services. They offer temporary financial assistance when appropriate as well as connection to other services. For qualified veterans and their families the Veterans Program could assist with: burial assistance, filing for compensation and pension, employment assistance, health services, housing assistance, legal assistance and temporary financial assistance for food, utilities, etc.  **Bellingham Vet Center – Thomas Renteria**  The Vet Center offers an array of services to eligible veterans and family members. The center offers readjustment counseling services for individual, group, marital, family, and bereavement counseling. They also offer assistance in applying for VA benefits, employment counseling, guidance and referral, alcohol and drug assessments, information and referral to community resources, community education, etc.  **Behavioral Health – Bridget Cantrell**  Dr. Cantrell is one of 35 behavioral health providers of WDVA. She provides counseling service to veterans and family members with war-era and PTSD related problems. The other counseling service she provides is readjustment, bereavement, military sexual trauma  **Supportive Services for Veterans Families(SSVF)/Opportunity Council – Mellisa Nyberg**  SSVF/Opportunity Council assist very low-income Veteran families residing in or transitioning to permanent housing. They provide a range of supportive services to eligible Veteran families that are designed to promote housing stability. Their housing facilities in Whatcom County include a short term emergency housing, transitioning housing and permanent housing. For Whatcom County – Dorothy Place – is a secure 22 unit facility in Bellingham that provides support services and housing for families and individuals who have experienced or are survivors of domestic violence.  **CHOICE Program – John Beckham**  The Veterans Choice Program is a program to improve veteran’s access to health care by allowing eligible veterans to use approved health care providers outside of VA. Section 101 of the Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act of 2014 (VACCA) required the VA to establish the program. For a veteran to be eligible, he/she must be enrolled in the VA health care system and must also meet at least one of the following criteria – were told by the local VA medical facility that they are unable to schedule an appointment for care either within 30 days of the date the provider determines you need to be seen or within 30 days of the date you wish to be seen if there is no specific date from the provider; the current residence of the veteran is more than 40 miles driving distance from the closest VA medical facility including community based outpatient clinic that has a full time primary care physician; the veteran face an unusual or excessive burden in traveling to the closest VA medical facility based on geographic challenges, etc.  If in doubt, call the Choice Program at 866-606-8198 or visit: [www.va.gov/opa/choiceact](http://www.va.gov/opa/choiceact) |
| **Issues Discussed** | 1. Choice Program – So much confusion about using the choice program. When calling the Call Center information given are not the same. Wait time to get approval for referral too long.  **Solution –** To date TriWest who administers the Choice Program have hired call center individuals that are assisting veterans getting their appointment. Joe Nortz who was present gave his info to everyone and encourage everyone present to contact him if they come across some issues that needs to be resolved  2. Niece of a Vietnam Era Veteran who is assisting her Uncle with his health care came across some issues that VA is refusing to pay medical expenses incurred when the services was approved.  **Solution –** John Beckham and Hoe Nortz asked the individual to speak with them after the town hall so they could assist and get more info regarding this issue. The niece later informed us that issue is resolved – she just need to resend paper work again to be processed for payment  3. Request a town hall meeting opportunity with the US Department of Veterans Affairs along with other community partners in the Bellingham area  **Solution –** We bring this to the attention of the Governor’s Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee and work out a schedule for this to happen. |

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