

**DRAFT MINUTES**  
**Senate Committee on State Agencies and Governmental Affairs**  
**House Committee on Aging, Children and Youth, Legislative and Military Affairs**  
**Meeting Jointly**

**Monday, August 12, 2019**  
**10:00 AM**  
**Room A, MAC**  
**Little Rock, Arkansas**

**Committee Members Present: Senators** Ronald Caldwell, Chair; Trent Garner, Vice-Chair; Bart Hester and Jimmy Hickey Jr. **Representatives** Charlene Fite, Chair; Sonia Eubanks Barker, Vice-Chair; LeAnne Burch, Craig Christiansen, Brian Evans, Don Glover, Tippi McCullough, Jay Richardson, Keith Slape, and Stu Smith.

**Other Legislators Present: Senators** Jonathan Dismang, Mark Johnson, Terry Rice and Larry Teague. **Representatives** Fred Allen, Stan Berry, Gary Deffenbaugh, Jim Dotson, Kenneth Ferguson, Vivian Flowers, Justin Gonzales, Lane Jean, Fredrick Love, Milton Nick Jr., Johnny Rye, Dan Sullivan, and Jim Wooten.

Representative Fite called the meeting to order. She recognized Senator Caldwell for remarks.

**Discussion of Act 551 of 2019 – An Act to Create the Arkansas Legislative Study on Veterans Affairs.**

**Senator Trent Garner, Senate District 27**, was recognized to give a brief introduction of the purpose of Act 551 of 2019. He is a former Special Forces Green Beret who served two tours in Afghanistan. Since being elected in 2016 his military service background has allowed veterans to understand him and disclose their issues to him. Twenty-two veterans commit suicide everyday in the United States. He requested the presenters to discuss the services they already provide for veterans and what could be done to serve the veteran community better.

**Gina Chandler, Assistant Director, Arkansas Department of Veterans Affairs**, was recognized to explain the purpose of Arkansas Department of Veterans Affairs. The office has three missions they operate the Veterans Homes in North Little Rock and Fayetteville, they operate two cemeteries, one in North Little Rock and one in Fordyce, and the Veterans Services Division. The Veterans Services Division oversees and provides training to the county Veteran Service Officer Program in all 75 counties. The veteran service officer helps veterans apply for federal benefits and determines what local and state resources are available. The Veterans Services Division has partnered with the Federal VA to provide training on suicide prevention and how to recognize signs of possible suicide. Funding seems to be the biggest issues in providing a veterans service officer for each of the Arkansas counties. In some counties the service officer works two days a week and in others they work 40 hours a week.

**Brigadier General John Payne, Deputy Adjutant General, Arkansas National Guard**, was recognized and stated the primary focus of the Arkansas National Guard is readiness of our traditional guardsmen and that readiness is to respond to natural disasters such as the recent flooding. However, they do provide some services to veterans and those services are provided

through their Joint Service Support Office. This office is on Camp Robinson and is federally funded. They have transition assistance advisers that will assist any time a service members separates from active duty and has veteran status. For dependents of veterans, they offer survivor outreach services to help with inquiries for survivor benefits. They also have a military funeral honor team.

**Colonel Don Berry, Governmental Affairs, Arkansas Veterans Coalition**, was recognized to discuss veterans' suicide rates. Arkansas was the ninth highest rate for suicides in 2017. Rural counties in Arkansas have a higher rate of suicide. Veterans enrolled in Veterans Health Administration (VHA) care are at a lower risk for suicide. Suicide rate for women veterans are 1.8 times greater than the suicide rate for non-veteran women. To reduce the veteran suicide rate, the Federal Government must work with partners from State, local, territorial, and tribal governments, as well as private and non-profit entities to provide veterans with services they need. Additionally, a community-focused public health model should be used. This program should include: increase in community involvement; assess community readiness; build local coalitions; use community-specific public health data to tailor interventions; and provide metrics on program effectiveness.

### **University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences**

**Dr. Angie Waliski, Research Health Scientist, Central Arkansas Veterans Health System, - Assistant Professor, Department of Psychiatry, College of Medicine, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences**, was recognized. She stated there is a major suicide problem in Arkansas. The suicide rates are going up and in particular in the veteran community and there is a need to look at this at a systems level. The VA is not going to be able to solve this problem alone and neither will the State. It will take a collaborative community health approach that pulls the resources together and engage the public.

**Dr. Sara J. Landes, Clinical Psychologist, Central Arkansas Veterans Health System, - Assistant Professor, Department of Psychiatry, College of Medicine, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences**, stated that veteran access to VA care should increase and engage veterans that are not already receiving care. There are also many veterans that are not eligible for VA care therefore, figuring out what resources are available in the community is imperative. Arkansas is ranked 44<sup>th</sup> for access to mental health care.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:15 A.M.