

Memorandum



CITY OF DALLAS

DATE June 10, 2022

TO Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council

SUBJECT **Veterans Affairs Commission Realignment**

The Office of Equity and Inclusion is pleased to announce the realignment of the Veteran Affairs Commission (VAC) to the Welcoming Communities and Immigrant Affairs team. As the first city in the State of Texas to earn the Certified Welcoming status, the intention is to expand the portfolio to service members and their families. Welcoming Communities and Immigrant Affairs Division of the Office of Equity and Inclusion is under the leadership of Christina da Silva, WCIA Officer.

The VAC will transition to WCIA Officer da Silva's leadership August 2022, after the summer recess. Upon return Christina and the Commission will get back to work fulfilling Mayor Johnson's charge of focusing on the evaluation and recommendation of policies, and practices designed to alleviate veterans' difficulties in meeting basic needs. The VAC has provided a needs assessment and recommendations in its Annual Report, see attachment, that staff is reviewing across departments, including, obtaining housing, employment, and mental health assistance; acting as a central clearinghouse for information relating to the status of veterans in the Dallas community; and accumulating information about the needs of veterans in the Dallas community, including available services, and making recommendations to the City Council regarding these needs.

I would like to acknowledge the staff from the Office of Equity & Inclusion's Human Rights Division and the City Attorney's Office for their efforts in the formation of the VAC. As we make this organizational transition, OEI staff will work with the VAC to develop a needs assessment to be conducted early next fiscal year with Dallas' veteran community.

If there are any questions about this change or the work of the Veteran Affairs Commission, please contact Dr. Lindsey Wilson, Director of the Office of Equity & Inclusion.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Liz Cedillo-Pereira'.

M. Elizabeth (Liz) Cedillo-Pereira
Assistant City Manager

DATE June 10, 2022

SUBJECT **Veterans Affairs Commission Realignment**

c: T.C. Broadnax, City Manager
Chris Caso, City Attorney
Mark Swann, City Auditor
Billerae Johnson, City Secretary
Preston Robinson, Administrative Judge
Kimberly Bizer Tolbert, Deputy City Manager

Majed A. Al-Ghafry, Assistant City Manager
Robert Perez, Assistant City Manager
Carl Simpson, Assistant City Manager
M. Elizabeth Reich, Chief Financial Officer
Genesis D. Gavino, Chief of Staff to the City Manager
Directors and Assistant Directors

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CITY SECRETARY
DALLAS, TEXAS



City of Dallas

Dallas Veteran Affairs Commission

2021 Annual Report

MEMORANDUM

Date: January 27, 2022

To: The Honorable Mayor and City Council Members

Subject: 2021 Veteran Affairs Commission (VAC) Annual Report for FYI 2020-2021

In accordance to Dallas City Code, Chapter 8, Section 1.1 (a), which states in part that, “By February 1 of each year, each board shall submit to the City Manager for distribution to the City Council an annual report that has been approved by the board of its activities...” the Veteran Affairs Commission (VAC) has come together in a Monthly Meeting on January 13, 2022 to discuss, finalize, vote and approve the Commission’s goals and all other pertinent information necessary to complete the Annual Report document requested by the City Secretary’s office.

Therefore, I am pleased to present the Annual Report for the Veteran Affairs Commission (VAC) for 2021. One of the biggest accomplishments of the Committee has been for the Veteran Commission to come together and to collect information about resources that will help our accomplishment for the upcoming year and providing continuing advice and counsel to the Mayor and City Council and the City Manager regarding services to Veterans.

The Commission looks forward to another year of service to the City. Sincerely,



Allen R Vaught, Chair
Veteran Affairs
Commission

Attachment – Veteran Affairs Commission 2021 Annual

Report: T.C. Broadnax, City Manager
Mary Cedillo-Pereira, Chief of Equity and Inclusion
Biliera Johnson, City Secretary

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MISSION AND PURPOSE OF THE DALLAS VETERAN AFFAIRS COMMISSION

The veteran affairs commission will represent the city’s military veteran community. The veteran affairs commission must have a balanced membership reflecting an outstanding interest in or knowledge of veterans’ affairs, including having knowledge about veterans’ concerns, or being affiliated with a service provider to veterans, and at least four members must be currently serving or have previously served in the United States military (including the Reserves or National Guard). (City Code § 2-170(c)).

DUTIES AND FUNCTIONS OF THE DALLAS VETERAN AFFAIRS COMMISSION

Pursuant to Section 2-171 of the Dallas City Code, the Dallas Veteran Affairs Commission shall act as an advisory body to the City Manager and the City Council and shall:

- (1) evaluate and recommend programs, policies, and practices designed to alleviate veterans’ difficulties in meeting basic needs, obtaining housing, employment, and comprehensive mental health assistance;
- (2) act as a central clearinghouse for information relating to the status of veterans in the Dallas community;
- (3) accumulate information about the needs of veterans in the Dallas community, including available services, and make recommendations to the city council regarding these needs;
- (4) recommend ways to:
 - (A) educate the community on:
 - (i) the status of veterans’ rights and needs; and
 - (ii) veterans’ contributions to our community; and
 - (B) promote awareness among the public and private sector of veterans’ full potential and of the importance of veterans’ contributions to the development of the community; and
- (5) identify and review the entire range of services available to veterans, and recommend ways to:
 - (A) strengthen existing services and pursue new services for veterans;
 - (B) promote collaboration between service providers; and
 - (C) expand resources available to veterans.

OVERVIEW OF 2021 DALLAS VETERAN AFFAIRS COMMISSION ACTIVITIES

The Commission was newly created in 2021 and thus was unable to conduct business until late in the calendar year when a sufficient quorum of Commissioners had been appointed by City Council.

The Commission meets on the second Thursday of each month unless such date is a local, state, or nationally recognized holiday. The Commission does not meet in July.

The Commission decided to make its initial focus on veterans' needs, available resources, and missing resources relative to:

- (1) housing, to include homelessness,
- (2) health care, to include mental health, and
- (3) jobs.

At its hybrid meetings held virtually and in-person during the year, the Commission received briefings from the following persons. Time is also allotted for public comment at the beginning of each meeting and at other relevant times during each meeting.

- Dr. Stephen R. Holt, Executive Medical Center Director, Department of Veterans Affairs, Dallas Veterans Affairs Medical Center ("Dallas VAMC"), discussed Dallas VAMC resources, needs, and opportunities for coordination with the City of Dallas to assist with veterans' issues.
- Eric D. Jacobsen, Associate Director, Dallas VAMC, discussed Dallas VAMC medical services.
- Dr. Steven Bender, Chief of Comprehensive Mental Health, Dallas VAMC, discussed Dallas VAMC mental health services.
- Ken Waterson, President, Veterans Resource Center (VRC) discussed VRC services, gaps in service delivery and possible synergies for better coordination of services with the assistance of the City of Dallas
- James Henderson, Interim Director and Lead Case Manager, Dallas County Veteran Services discussed the limitations his organization has in assisting with Veteran benefit claims and coordination with other Veterans Service Organizations.
- Senior Director of Veteran Initiatives, Sean M. Hanna talked to the Commissioners on health care for Veterans. He discussed about Veteran Affairs programs, services, healthcare, and advocacy help to the Veteran Affairs.

- Senior Assistant City Attorney, Bertram Vandenberg trained the Commissioners on Texas Open Meetings Act (TOMA). Chapter 12A Code of Ethics training was presented by Senior Assistant City Attorney, Laura Morrison.
- Senior Assistant City Attorney, Marichelle Samples trained the Commissioners on attendance, quorum, and creation of sub committees.

POTENTIAL ISSUES AND CERTAIN FACTS IDENTIFIED THROUGH INTERVIEWS AND TESTIMONY

- Data cards were provided to the Dallas Police Department by the Department of Veterans Affairs, Dallas Veterans Affairs Medical Center (“Dallas VAMC”) that identified resources available to veterans in distress prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. For unknown reasons, those cards are no longer provided.
 - Data cards identifying resources for veterans in distress should be provided to the Dallas Police Department and expanded to the Dallas Fire Department and other appropriate local law enforcement and first responders.
 - To the maximum extent possible, these data cards should also be provided to the Dallas Office of Homeless Solutions and homeless assistance organizations.
 - Training on the resources available to veterans in distress as needed for law enforcement, first responders, and other relevant City of Dallas departments.
- Dallas VAMC believes the number of homeless veterans in Dallas is significant. While that number is currently unknown, this Commission plans to consult with the Dallas Office of Homeless Solutions, Metro Dallas Homeless Alliance, and other relevant organizations to determine the approximate number of homeless veterans in Dallas.
- Issues relative to veteran homelessness include:
 - Availability of transitional housing for veterans with children. More help possibly needed from the Dallas Housing Authority.
 - Dallas VAMC needs more housing options with Dallas area property owners/landlords to accept vouchers. More help possibly needed from the Dallas Housing Authority.
 - Web presence on the City of Dallas website.
- The Department of Veterans Affairs, North Texas Healthcare System, is the second largest VA Healthcare System in the United States. It covers 38 counties in North Texas, including Dallas County, and two counties in Oklahoma. It has the largest mental healthcare program in the United States.

- Many veterans are unaware of their eligibility for benefits with the Department of Veterans Affairs, some do not even identify themselves as veterans merely as former service members.
- Dallas VAMC lacks approximately 2,000 square feet of space needed to assist local veterans. Such space could be used for Veterans Service Organizations (“VSO”) to work with veterans to apply for benefits with the Department of Veterans Affairs.
- Veterans often are unable to access resources unless they have the ability to prove military service, many have lost discharge papers (DD-214 or equivalent).
- Veterans with mental health and substance abuse issues need extra assistance (case work) to prepare them for, and assist in, transition to stable housing and work.
- The Department of Veterans Affairs makes suicide prevention one of its highest (and possibly the highest) priorities. The veteran suicide rate in this region has declined from the prior year for the first time since 2001.
- Veterans often do not know how to access the resources that are available to assist them and lack a single point of contact to assist them in connecting to those resources.
- Veterans often have difficulty physically accessing resources, getting transportation to various resource providers, internet access, etc. In addition, the VA has moved its benefits resource operations from the Dallas VAMC to less accessible location in Grand Prairie adversely impacting claims assistance in Dallas.
- Veterans benefit claims are often delayed due to missing documentation, incomplete claims or through large caseloads for Veterans Service Officers and the VA claims system. Veterans need assistance in managing their claims and appeals if required.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DALLAS CITY MANAGER AND CITY COUNCIL

- **Coordinate** with Dallas Police Department, Dallas Fire Department, and other relevant local law enforcement and first responders, on the one hand, and the Department of Veterans Affairs, Dallas Veterans Affairs Medical Center (“Dallas VAMC”), on the other hand, for law enforcement and first responders to have data cards in their possession for contact resources relative to veterans in distress and training, as needed, on addressing veterans in distress and the capabilities of the local resources that are available to assist them. **Implement** distribution of data cards and training.
- **Coordinate** with the Dallas Office of Homeless Solutions, on the one hand, and Dallas VAMC, on the other hand, to provide the Dallas Office of Homeless Solutions with data cards referenced in the foregoing paragraph. **Implement** distribution of data cards and training.

- Dallas Office of Homeless Solutions coordinates with and provides data cards to homeless assistance organizations in Dallas.
- **Provide resources and coordinate case management** for health, housing, and job assistance among City of Dallas, Dallas County, State of Texas, and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.
 - Possible involvement and/or coordination with the Dallas Economic Development Corporation.
- **Coordinate** with Dallas VAMC and the Dallas Housing Authority and **implement** other resources to help reduce homeless veteran rate by:
 - Increasing available transitional housing for veterans with children.
 - Increasing housing availability veterans in general.
 - Possible incentives for Dallas area property owners/landlords to accept vouchers.
- **Outreach** to veterans in particular to establish eligibility, engage them with medical, mental health, housing services, etc.
 - Examples include public service announcements on Dallas Area Rapid Transit vehicles.
 - The City of Dallas employs many veterans, so possible internal advertisement on availability of benefits and who to contact for help in applying for benefits, such as Veterans Service Organizations (“VSOs”).
 - VSO entities that can assist veterans in learning about available benefits and applying for benefits can be found on the Department of Veterans Affairs website here - <https://www.va.gov/vso/>. Examples of VSO entities include the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, and many others.
- **Identify and potentially provide resources** for additional space to assist the Dallas VAMC with its approximate 2,000 square feet shortage of space, such space being needed for VSO work with and for veterans in learning about and applying for benefits with the Department of Veterans Affairs.
- **Identify and potentially provide human resources** to work with and for veterans in learning about and applying for benefits with the Department of Veterans Affairs.
- **Provide resources and coordinate case management** with City, County and State government veterans and social service agencies.

- **Transportation and Internet:** Work with Dallas Area Rapid Transit to identify transportation solutions for veterans lacking transportation resources; work with City agencies such as the Dallas Public Library to provide internet access.
- **Establish** an Office for Veterans Assistance to assist with implementation of the foregoing.
- **Oversight:** Re-purpose the Veteran Affairs Commission to provide oversight of the Veterans Assistance Office and task it to establish and monitor performance metrics.

2021 DALLAS VETERAN AFFAIRS COMMISSION MEMBERSHIP

This Commission requires that nominees for positions on this board have one of the following qualifications:

The Dallas Veteran Affairs Commission must have a balanced membership reflecting an outstanding interest in or knowledge of veterans' affairs, including having knowledge about veterans' concerns, or being affiliated with a service provider to veterans, and at least four members must be currently serving or have previously served in the United States military (including the Reserves or National Guard). (City Code § 2-170).

The Commission consists of the following members as of January 13, 2022:

District 01 Douglas Taylor	Served in U.S. Military
District 02 Juan M. Preciado	Served in U.S. Military
District 03 Katina Robertson	Served in U.S. Military
District 06 Ronnie Lee Mestas, Vice-Chair	Served in U.S. Military
District 07 Diane E. Birdwell	Served in U.S. Military
District 08 Kevin M. Henton	Served in U.S. Military
District 09 Steven T. Ramos	Served in U.S. Military
District 10 Anthony A. Wood	Served in U.S. Military
District 12 Fred L. Wells	Served in U.S. Military
District 13 Mary Ellen Viancourt	Served in U.S. Military
District 14 Peter Gray Smith	Served in U.S. Military
District 15 Allen R. Vaught, Chair	Served in U.S. Military

Staff support:

Hiwote Tadesse, Human Rights Coordinator
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