The Texas Legislature Leads the Way: Empowering Agency Response - Beating Backlogs and Helping Healthcare

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• The Texas Veterans Commission was established in 1927 and is the advocacy agency for Veterans in the State of Texas.

• The mission of Texas Veterans Commission is to advocate for and provide superior service to Veterans in the areas of claims assistance, employment services, education, and grant funding that will significantly improve the quality of life for all Texas Veterans, their families and survivors.
Agency Programs

Providing Direct Services to Veterans
• Claims Representation & Counseling
• Veterans Employment Services
• Veterans Education Programs

Providing Grants to Organizations that Assist Veterans
• Fund for Veterans’ Assistance

Connecting Services to Veterans
• Communications and Veterans Outreach
• Women Veterans Initiative
• Veteran Entrepreneur Program

No other state has centralized all of these program areas within their state’s Veterans agency.

Texas is becoming recognized for aggressively leading on Veteran issues. National leaders have referred to the “Texas-model” when advocating for the integration of Veterans services.
Since the days of the Republic, Texas has always supported her veterans in return for their military service. In the early days, it was in the form of land given by the state for military service in the Texas Revolution. In 1946, this tradition was formally recognized with the creation of the Texas Veterans Land Board (VLB) to administer benefits exclusively for Texas veterans. Since then, more than 200,000 VLB loans have been funded for Texas veterans. For over half a century, the VLB has been keeping the promise to serve Texas veterans, for life.
• **Land Loans** - The foundation of the VLB is to help Texan veterans buy their piece of Texas with low-interest, long-term land loans.

• **Home Loans** - In 1983, the Legislature created the Veterans Housing Assistance Program to help Texas veterans buy homes with special, low-interest loans for home purchase. Texas voters overwhelmingly approved a constitutional amendment authorizing the issuance of bonds to fund the program.

• **Home Improvement Loans** - In 1986, the VLB expanded the Veterans Housing Assistance Program, adding the Veterans Home Improvement Program to provide below-market interest rate loans to qualified Texas veterans for home repairs and improvements to their existing homes.

• **State Veterans Homes** - In 1997, Senator Jerry Patterson passed a law authorizing the Texas State Veterans Home program to provide long-term care services for Texas veterans. Since 2001, the VLB has built eight Texas State Veterans Homes, which offer long-term, skilled-nursing care for veterans. The homes are located in Amarillo, Big Spring, Bonham, El Paso, Floresville, McAllen, Temple, and Tyler.

• **State Veterans Cemeteries** - In 2006, to augment the federal veterans cemeteries and allow veterans to be buried closer to home and family, the VLB opened the state’s first Texas State Veterans Cemetery in Killeen, followed by state veterans cemeteries in Mission, Abilene, and Corpus Christi.
Beating the VA Backlog
State Strike Force and Fully Developed Claims Teams Initiative
On July 16, 2012, the Texas Veterans Commission testified before the State Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs and Military Installations, presenting data which showed that the backlog of Veterans claims filed with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in Texas.

- In January 2010, the total backlog of VA claims in Texas was a little over 16,800 claims.
- By July 2012, the backlog in Texas had quadrupled to over 68,000 claims.
On July 19, 2012, Lieutenant Governor David Dewhurst, working with Governor Perry and Speaker Straus, directed the Texas Veterans Commission to launch the State Strike Force and Fully Developed Claims Teams Initiative to help reduce the federal backlog of Veterans claims for disability benefits.

• **State Strike Force Teams**, located at each of the two VA regional offices in Texas, work exclusively on backlogged claims.

• **Fully Developed Claims Teams**, work to expedite newly filed, fully-developed claims, which the VA pledged to complete within in 90 days.

• Initially authorized two (2) Strike Force Teams of eight (8) members each and two (2) Fully Developed Claims Teams of five (5) members each. Also authorized eight (8) additional claims staff to supplement efforts in areas of the state with critical claims volume.

• Total effort authorized – **34 FTEs**
• In January 2013, Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Speaker and the Chairs of Senate Finance and House Appropriations committed additional resources to the State Strike Force and Fully Developed Claims Teams by authorizing an additional sixteen (16) team members.

• The 83rd Texas Legislature approved supplemental appropriations for fiscal year 2013 and appropriated funds to continue the initiative through 2014 and 2015.
The Texas Veterans Commission hosted twelve (12) "Beating the VA Backlog" events to provide direct, one-on-one assistance to Texas Veterans.

Members from the State Strike Force Teams, as well as TVC Claims Counselors and County Service Officers, provided direct and specific assistance to Veterans, family members and survivors including:

- Status on pending claim or appeal
- Information on VA and State Veterans benefits
- Accept new evidence for your claim or appeal
- Submit new claims or claims for increases on current service-connected disabilities
- Submit a Notice of Disagreement (NOD) to appeal a VA decision

Over 1,985 Veterans, family members, and survivors have received direct assistance at these events.
Twelve (12) months after the State Strike Force Teams were initiated, the Houston and Waco VA Regional Offices (RO) were compared to similar ROs throughout the United States.

ROs with comparable caseloads and numbers of backlog cases were selected out of each of VBA’s 4 regions:

- Salt Lake City RO (Western)
- St. Louis RO (Central)
- St. Petersburg RO (Southern)
- Cleveland RO (Eastern)
• In the first eighteen (18) months of operation, the State Strike Force Teams reviewed over \textbf{35,000 cases}.

• Additionally, the Fully Developed Claims Teams submitted more than \textbf{15,700 new claims}, which the VA pledged to complete within 90 days.

• These combined efforts helped reduce the backlog of federal disability claims in Texas by half, resulting in approximately \textbf{$78 million} in retroactive payments and \textbf{$27 million} in new monthly awards to Texas Veterans and their families.
Helping with VA Healthcare
Texas Veterans Healthcare Hotline
and
Texas Veterans Healthcare Strike Force Team/
Texas Veterans Healthcare Liaisons
In April 2014, scheduling deficiencies emerged within the Veterans Health Administration of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) that revealed lengthy wait times for Veterans trying to access health care through the VA as well as systemic safety issues and possible wrongful deaths at VA medical facilities.

While solving this problem is ultimately a Federal responsibility, the State of Texas has repeatedly shown that it is willing to provide state resources to support Texas Veterans. As it did with the backlog, the State of Texas immediately began looking for ways to help Texas Veterans.
The success of the State Strike Force and Fully Developed Claims Teams served as a model for the solutions sought by both the Governor and Texas Legislature, particularly the Committee on Veterans Affairs and Military Installations of the Texas Senate and the Committee on Defense and Veteran Affairs of the Texas House of Representatives:

A dedicated Texas Veterans Healthcare Strike Force Team to assist and advocate on behalf of Texas Veterans who are having problems getting healthcare from the VA. The work of such a team will be supported by the Texas Veterans Hotline, operated by the Veterans Land Board, and Texas Veteran Healthcare Fairs across the state.
On June 10, 2014, the Committee on Veterans Affairs and Military Installations of the Texas Senate held a hearing examining the allegations that the VA denied health and mental health care and manipulated waiting lists to access care. The committee also expressed support for the state role in assisting Veterans in Texas with VA health care as it did with the State Strike Force Teams for VA disability claims.

At the groundbreaking ceremony for the National Intrepid Center of Excellence Satellite on June 10, 2014, Governor Perry announced his direction to the Texas Veterans Commission to dedicate additional resources to help veterans navigate the VA health care bureaucracy and that Texas Veterans Hotline could assist Texas Veterans with their healthcare.
Developed at the request of the Governor and the Legislature, the Texas Veterans Commission envisioned a Texas Veterans Healthcare State Strike Force Team or network of Texas Veterans Healthcare Liaisons.

This team/the liaisons work from VA medical offices around the state and will act to help resolve any access issues raised by Texas Veterans or referred to them by the Texas Veterans Hotline.

The Texas Veterans Hotline serves as a resource for veterans who have had problems receiving care from the VA. The hotline utilizes the existing 800 number for Texas Veterans (1-800-252-VETS) which is operated by the Veterans Land Board.
Bill McLemore is the Deputy Commissioner, Veterans Land & Housing Program, General Land Office, and Executive Secretary, Veterans Land Board.

From the moment the crisis emerged, he fully supported using the existing veterans call center to support this initiative.

Moreover, Mr. McLemore is uniquely situated make critical connections within the VA and to train call center staff to handle these calls as he served as a Senior Advisor and Deputy Assistant Secretary at the VA from 2001 to 2008 and, from 2008 until his selection as Deputy Commissioner, he served as a Senior Staff Advisor and Veteran Advocate to the Director of the VA Heart of Texas Health Care Network.
Proposed fourteen-member (14) Texas Veterans Healthcare State Strike Force Team/Texas Veterans Healthcare Liaison Team:

- Texas Veterans Healthcare Liaison – Austin/Temple (1 FTE)
- Texas Veterans Healthcare Liaisons – Houston (2 FTEs)
- Texas Veterans Healthcare Liaisons – San Antonio (2 FTEs)
- Texas Veterans Healthcare Liaison – Dallas (1 FTE)
- Texas Veterans Healthcare Liaison – Fort Worth (1 FTE)
- Texas Veterans Healthcare Liaison – Rio Grande Valley (1 FTE)
- Texas Veterans Healthcare Liaison – El Paso/West Texas (1 FTE)
- Texas Veterans Healthcare Liaison – Panhandle (1 FTE)
- Women Veterans Healthcare Liaison (1 FTE)
- Healthcare Fairs and Education Liaison (1 FTE)
- Team Coordinator and State Capacity Liaison (1 FTE)
- Texas Veterans Healthcare Liaison Support (1 FTE)
The Texas Veterans Commission started staffing the team based on the funding assurances provided by the Governor’s Office:

- Team Coordinator and State Capacity Liaison (1 FTE, June 15)
- Women Veterans Healthcare Liaison (1/2 FTE, June 15)
- Healthcare Fairs and Education Liaison (1 FTE, June 15)
- Texas Veterans Healthcare Liaisons – Houston (1 FTE, July 1)

The Texas Veterans Commission also moved to begin developing the coordination database, the contracted legal support for the initiative, and the support to work with the U.S. Congress and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs in Washington, D.C. to address these issues.

Phasing in 1 FTE in major cities and delay areas: Austin/Temple, Fort Worth, Rio Grande Valley, San Antonio, Dallas, and El Paso/West Texas (1 FTE).
• Immediately after the (VAMI) hearing and the Governor’s announcement, the Texas Veterans Commission coordinated with the Veterans Land Board regarding training for the staff of the Texas Veterans Hotline. Literally sitting side by side with VA.
• The Texas Veterans Healthcare Liaison Team Coordinator and the team have taken all calls transferred by the Texas Veterans Hotline to date. These calls have increased after the release of the Governor’s Public Service Announcement.
• The Texas Veterans Commission also worked with the Governor’s Office to support the addition of the Texas Veterans Hotline to the Texas Veterans App of the Health and Human Services Commission.
• Provided information and support to media regarding this initiative.
• Implementation meeting with VISN 17 Director.
• Started compiling a Women Veterans Healthcare Survey.
• Worked with the Veterans Land Board to plan and have a healthcare focus for the FY 2015 veterans benefit fairs:
  – September 20, 2014: Austin Veterans Outpatient Clinic
  – October 11, 2014: Granbury CBOC
  – November 8, 2014: Amarillo VA Hospital
  – January 24, 2015: Waco Veterans Hospital
  – February 7, 2015: Corpus Christi VA Outpatient Clinic
  – March 7, 2015: San Antonio, VA Outpatient Clinic
  – April 18, 2015: Tomball VA Outpatient Clinic
  – May 29, 2015: Dallas VA Medical Center
  – June 13, 2015: Big Spring VA Medical Center
  – July 18, 2015: Ft. Worth Veterans Outpatient Clinic
  – August 15, 2015: San Antonio, Audie L. Murphy VA Hospital
  – Also planning separate veteran healthcare fairs for Fall 2014 for the Valley, San Antonio, and El Paso.
Beyond the VA: Significant Empowerment

Providing Direct Services to Veterans
- Claims Representation & Counseling
- Veterans Employment Services
- Veterans Education Programs

Providing Grants to Organizations that Assist Veterans
- Fund for Veterans’ Assistance

Connecting Services to Veterans
- Communications and Veterans Outreach
- Women Veterans Initiative
- Veteran Entrepreneur Program
- Military Veteran Peer Network (September 2014)

Since 2006, the Texas Legislature has empowered the Texas Veterans Commission like no other state to serve our Veterans in new and critically needed areas.
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