



California Veterans Board

Little Hoover Commission Hearing
Written Testimony
Charlene Taylor, RN, Chairperson
March 3, 2015

History

The people of the State of California have a long and distinguished history of support for the men and women who have served the United States Military. This support has, over time, manifested itself by the development of a significant California public policy segment devoted to veterans and issues of importance to them. Originally formed in 1946 to determine the policy for all operations of the California Department of Veterans Affairs (Department), the California Veterans Board (Board), adjusted from a policy setting role to an advisory role in 2013 (AB 717). Although no longer setting policy for the Department, the Board still maintains a strong presence advocating for Veterans and advising the Department on the needs of California's Veterans and their dependents. Working collaboratively with the Secretary and the Department, always maintaining focus on Veterans and striving for open communication and cohesive efforts is the Board's goal. Through the Board's various activities out in the veteran community and the meetings held up and down the State of California, we are able to gather pertinent information necessary to take back to the Department. In this way, the Board provides relevant input necessary to maintain a high standard of service and dedication to all Veterans.

Board Membership

The Board consists of 7 members appointed by the Governor and subject to the confirmation of the State Senate. The Board is highly diverse and well-qualified, meeting all of the criteria required by AB 717. All are veterans and reside in the state of California.

Charlene Taylor RN, Chair: Ms. Taylor, of Elk Grove, served from 1993-2008 in the Air Force Reserve as a flight nurse and Chief Nurse. She deployed twice in support of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. Ms. Taylor retired from Kaiser Permanente in 2013 as the Chief Operating Officer, Sacramento. She earned a Master of Arts degree in Nursing Administration from the University of California, San Francisco. Ms. Taylor is a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Hugh Crooks, Jr., Vice-Chair: Mr. Crooks, Jr., of Los Angeles, served as a rifleman in the U.S. Army from 1967 to 1969. He was an operations manager at the Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk Human Resource Division from 2000 to 2005 and at the Los Angeles County Natural History Museum from 1994 to 2000. He held multiple positions at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County from 1971 to 2000, including operations manager and safety police chief. He is a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and was state commander of the American Legion from 2011 to 2012.

Caroline Morales, Member: Ms. Morales, of Yucaipa, has served on Active Duty in the Army and the California Army National Guard since 1991 and has been pro bono counsel at the Children's Attorney Project since 2004. She is a Combat Veteran and her previous assignments include: Platoon Leader, Company Commander, Battalion Personnel Officer, Battalion Training and Operations Officer, Commander of the 1498th Transportation Company in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Battalion Support Operations Officer, Battalion Executive Officer, and Commander of the 40th Brigade Support Battalion. Ms. Morales assumed duty as the 40th Infantry Division's Equal Opportunity Advisor and Chief of Psychological Operations on March 8th, 2015. She earned a Juris Doctor degree from the Southwestern Law School and is a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars

Gena Truitt, Board Member: Ms. Truitt, of Temecula, served in the U.S. Navy from 2000 to 2004. She has been case manager at U.S. VETS since 2013. Ms. Truitt was a veteran's advocate at Interfaith Community Services from 2012 to 2013, family support partner at Mental Health Systems, Courage to Call in 2012 and assistant and intern in U.S. Senator Barbara Boxer's San Diego District Office from 2011 to 2012. She earned a Master of Social Work degree from the University of Southern California. Ms. Truitt is a member of the American Legion and AMVETS.

Todd Trotter, Board Member: Mr. Trotter, of Sacramento, served in the U.S. Army from 1983 to 1991. He has been national senior director at Kaiser Permanente since 2013, where he has held several positions since 2002, including human resources leader, Northern California director of labor relations and human resource business partner. Mr. Trotter served as a letter carrier and labor relations representative at the U.S. Postal Service from 1992 to 2002. He earned a Juris Doctor degree from the University of the Pacific, McGeorge School of Law. Mr. Trotter is a member of Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion.

Juan Gonzalez, Board Member: Mr. Gonzalez, of Lancaster, served in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers from 1960 to 1968. He was a design engineer at Eaton Corporation

from 1987 to 1995. Mr. Gonzalez is the "resident member" on the board living at the California Veteran Home in Lancaster

Carla Thornton, Board Member: Ms. Thornton, of Moreno Valley, is currently serving in the United States Air Force reserve and served active duty from 1997 to 2008. She has experience as a victim advocate for the United States Air Force Reserve since 2007, and logistics manager for the United States Air Force since 1997. Ms. Thornton has been employed as the associate director of development at the University of California, Riverside since 2014. She was fund development coordinator at Human Options from 2012 to 2014 and combined federal campaign fund manager for the United States Air Force Reserve from 2009 to 2011. She earned a Master of Social Work degree from the University of Southern California and a Master of Arts degree in management from the University of Redlands.

Vision of the California Veterans Board

To be recognized as the premier advocate for California Veterans; to make California the premier environment for Veterans of the armed services of the United States of America.

Mission of the California Veterans Board

The California Veterans Board serves as an advocate for California Veterans and their dependents by identifying, communicating and addressing their needs.

Strategic Goals

1. Strengthen and demonstrate the Board's importance and relevancy to California Veterans.
2. Work in partnership with the Secretary and Department of Veterans Affairs for the benefit of all California Veterans.
3. Seek opportunities to proactively advise the Governor's office and the Department on Legislation that affects Veterans.
4. Monitor and review state and federal legislative activities that impact Veterans services and benefits.
5. Hear Veteran's appeals and render decisions in a timely manner.

Operational Information

The Board meets at least six times each year in different communities throughout California. Meetings are open to the public, and meeting notices/agendas are delivered as prescribed by the Bagley-Keene Open Meeting Act. In addition to our routine meetings and specially scheduled appeal hearing meetings, the Board also held two

“Town Hall” meetings in 2015. These Town Halls were less formal and were intended to reach out to the Veterans communities and seek their input regarding targeted topics i.e. homelessness and employment.

Individual Board members are also members of at least one veterans service organization including The American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and AMVETS in attempts to create a cohesive environment that encourages unity to further enhance and protect the rights and benefits of California’s Veterans.

As the designated authority, the Board hears and decides on Appeals brought against the Department for denial of a Veteran’s benefit. Any person deeming himself or herself a veteran and who applies for benefits may appeal any decision made by a division of the department to the Board. This pertains to State benefits only and may consist of denials of a home loan, student waiver, or admission into a veteran’s home. When an appeal is received, it is assigned to the Board member serving as chair of our administrative committee. For a Review of the Record appeal, the assigned member is responsible for reviewing all file material, and making a presentation to the full Board of his or her findings. In the event that the Appellant has chosen an “informal” or “formal” hearing, the entire Board will sit as jury and hear the case. Both sides may have legal counsel. Furthermore, the Board is the final level of administrative appeal.

Complaints are also brought to the Board’s attention resulting in calls and/or letters sent to the various parties until all matters are resolved and/or understood, in hopes that these initial interactions can, in effect, remove the need for a full Appeal.

Focus Areas for 2016

1. **Veterans Homes:** The Board is making the Veterans Homes a high priority area for 2016. The Objective is to partner with the Homes to increase visibility and gain knowledge of the Homes’ operations and to receive input from staff and residents. To accomplish this, each Board member has been assigned a Home(s). Each board member will attend their identified Home’s Allied Council and meet with the staff at least twice a year. Since establishing this goal, we have learned that the Secretary will be conducting Town Hall meetings with each Home and has invited the Board to participate in these events with him. The Board is greatly appreciative of this opportunity to partner with the Secretary.
2. **Veteran Home National Survey:** the Secretary has asked the Board to assist him by conducting a survey of at least ten Veterans Homes in other States to learn of their practices e.g. admission criteria, provision of care etc. The Board was pleased to assist in this way and is in the process of developing the tool for the Secretary’s review. We anticipate that this survey will be completed by April.

Summary

Since 2013 when AB 717 became effective, the Board has been in the process of transforming itself from an oversight body to an advisory one. Six of the seven Board members have been in their positions less than 2 years. Despite this, the Board has become very cohesive, displays great enthusiasm and is determined to make a difference. We have completed our second year of well-defined goals and are clear on our vision.

Upcoming Events:

Town Hall Meeting with the Secretary	March 10, 2016	Chula Vista
Board Meeting and Formal Appeal Hearing	March 29, 2016	Fresno
Town Hall Meeting with the Secretary	March 14, 2016	Yountville
Town Hall Meeting with the Secretary	April 25, 2016	Redding
Board Meeting	May 25, 2016	Southern CA
Board Meeting	July 27, 2016	Southern CA
Board Meeting	September 27, 2016	Northern CA
Board Meeting	November 30, 2016	Southern CA