



STATE OF WASHINGTON

VETERANS AFFAIRS ADVISORY COMMITTEE

PO BOX 41150 • Olympia, Washington 98504-1150 • (800) 562-2308

VAAC COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS AND WOMEN VETERANS FORUM

May 6, 2026

8:30 am – 9:30 am Women Veterans Forum

Health Motivate Care

10:00 am – 12:30 pm VAAC Community Conversations

Health Motivate Care

805 Clearwater Dr.

Pullman, WA 99163

MINUTES

Welcome, Pledge of Allegiance,
Invocation, Land
Acknowledgement, Introduction
of VAAC Members

- Shellie Willis called the Town Hall to order
- Chuck Whitman gave the Invocation and led the pledge of allegiance.
- Acknowledged the indigenous peoples who have lived and continue to live in this region including the Coeur d'Alene, Nez Perce, and Spokane tribes. This land was historically a center for trade and exchange among many Native peoples and we pay respect to elders past and present and to all Native peoples who continue to steward the land and live among us.

Introductions of Guests & VAAC
Members

Shellie Willis

- Recognized VAAC & WVAC Members in attendance
- Introduced Nathan Weller, Mayor Pro-Tempore for City of Pullman
 - Upcoming veteran memorial park groundbreaking on May 25th.
 - Looking into blue star memorial designation for the memorial park.
 - Looking to do a regional stand down – open to any suggestions on how to strengthen connections to military community in our area
- Introduced David Puente, WDVA Director

WDVA Introduction

David Puente

Goal today is to find out what's working, what's not, identify the gaps, we all can benefit our vets by building further partnerships.

Participants Introductions

Good Will – housing first program to help vets and their families get and keep housing, help those who are at risk of losing housing, help with foreclosure, those unhoused, in hotels.

Caption Call - no cost captioning service to anyone who is hearing impaired. Many of our customers are vets. Fully funded through ADA free to customers, 1% to profound hearing loss supported through desktop phones, and an app. Its about clarity as well as volume.

VA Caregiver Support Program – provide support to vets living at home with service-connected disability and significant care needs, goal is to keep them home and aging in place, provide financial supports to family caregivers, two separate programs: PCAFC stipend support for caregivers and PGSS education support, peer support

VA Healthcare – we are gateway to healthcare for veterans, application from start to eligibility refer out to VSOs, cover over 40k vets in our area, we help FFVS, can provide DD214s

Rual Resources – caregiver support, refer to state in home programs

Hospice- provide hospice for two counties, we come in when there is a diagnosis of life limiting disease, average is 18 days hospice care, this is a VA benefit that is covered. Includes a nurse who supports patients as well as family, symptom control, bathing, Chaplin and social worker. Biggest goal is to call sooner rather than later

Home Health – provide nursing, PT, OT, speech therapy, bathing etc in-home. Requires an order from doctor, do need to be home bound, covered 100% by VA or Medicare, have to have primary care and have been seen in last 90 days

Regency Pullman – care home for if aging in place at home is not an option, for VA coverage you must meet certain qualifications

WSU Veteran and Affiliated Students – rep students and coordinate between locations, support family who are obtaining education as well

American Legion Post 52 – help vets as much as we can by directing them to programs, support local baseball, give out scholarships at the High School

Whitman Recovery Community Center - peer support recovery program, assist in reintegration for new vets

VA Nurse Mobile Medical Unit- nursing clinic that meets marginalized populations where they are, work in homeless primary care clinic. Serve vets who are homeless in their community.

Pullman PD – no vet specific program, however community orientated policing is a priority and here to learn.

Spokane VA Medical Military to VA Post 9/11 Program – specific to post 9/11 folks as well as current transitioning vets. Provide case management from 1month to a few years.

Vet Benefits Counselor – vet engagement, referrals from call center, LAS. Work with a lot of local VSOs, assist with VA benefit letters.

Navy Veteran - self representing here to learn, shared personal struggles since getting out of military and that was not aware of any of these local supports.

VA Suicide Prevention Team – build collations, 60% of vets don't come to the VA, work with vets and families to prevent suicide, call 988-1.

Vet Services Spokane – benefits at discharge, assist with claims, connect vets with SSG Fox, work source

VSO for Whitman County – Claims for VA disability, refer as well.

WDVA Suicide Prevention – work with service members vets and families, provide trainings around LEARN which is an approach to suicide prevention, we also have lethal means training and combating stigma training that anyone who wants to engage can take. Have here today secure firearm locking devices and smoking cessation kits.

WDVA Outreach – community support around the state, any events you have and want WDVA to participate in please let us know. We have 5 core programs, network of VSOs, VEMP, Veterans financial assistance, mental health support, all info on website along with calendar of events. YOU can add events to our calendar too.

Patient Advocate Office at VA – Assist in connecting vets, refer a lot to DVA, help with bills, general referrals, questions of where to start, no appointments necessary and have a phone line. Please note that we are constrained by VA policy.

Vet Center Outreach – separate from hospital, provide counseling, we offer vet, significant other and family support, we offer virtual counseling, we also offer connections and referrals and assist in understanding VA benefits

Employee Security Dept – Yes Vets program, workforce

Long term care – help aging and disabled age in place, we work with rural resources

Deputy Director Solomon Gilbert – here to support listen and learn where we can help.

ONLINE: Vickie founder of lady vets first – provide support and meaningful connections that empower. Our women vets face unique circumstances. A lot of women vets feel disconnected would like to give my information and provide lists of resources.

Community Conversation

#1 QUESTION- What is single biggest barrier preventing you from providing services to vets right now?

Summary:

- *Disbelief in eligibility/free or low cost*
- *Denial of need and eligibility*
- *Lack of resources (e.g. providers, staff to process referrals) and transportation in rural areas particularly*
- *Poor messaging of available resources*
- *Referral processing delays (see lack of resources)*
- *Accessibility of paper applications and analog processes for older/rural veterans unable or unwilling to engage in computer processes*
- *How to identify vets who are not self-identifying in region for outreach/need better DOD partnership*

Discussion and education around policy change, veterans identifying on DD214, where data goes and current efforts by WDVA and state of WA to access and utilize this data in a secure way for outreach to separating vets.

Full conversation:

Caption Call – barrier is that people don't believe this is free, second it's the acknowledgment of hearing loss statistically people wait 7yrs from noticing something is off to getting help. So if you know anyone who you see struggling with hearing loss, please encourage them to get tested.

VA - not convenient, vets don't know who to connect with, they aren't getting info at TAPS. Getting to partner better with the DOD in WA would be a help and also reaching out to our rural communities like we are doing today. Sometimes national call centers don't know our programs exist. Word of mouth reach out to individuals and getting us all on one page would be beneficial.

Will – Eastern WA is very rural, if your VSO is busy, they were often booked 3 months out, thankful for satellite office. Need help getting news out, make sure info is up on all websites.

Patient Advocate - See a lot of healthcare barriers. Biggest issue is referral processing. Not enough funding, don't have enough staff to process all services. Our community care office is doing a great job catching up but we still have backlogs, hospice and oncology are about only ones that get done quickly. Rural is an issue for access as well not a lot of providers partner with TriWest. Both these are biggest barriers that delay care

- Lately have had issues with people struggling to get to our office. Someone who was trying to apply for survivor benefits. Spent over an hour trying to find transportation service. Had to call three different offices to even find out if there was a service much less if it was a VA benefit.

WSU - Tech is a challenge, a lot of rural areas don't have internet don't have cellphones, especially older generation do not want to spend time on a computer, they want to sit with a person and fill out paperwork. I understand we have gotten away from that as it's cheaper, but the need is still here. Digital Divide program was great for Spokane, but tablets had no service in Whitman County.

American Legion – we would like to get for our older vets a paper with a list of providers, a catalog of services and names that would be a big help.

- What I find very difficult, without compromising personal information, how do we identify vets in our area?

Councilman –Challenge I found is that especially in rural areas people are often not wanting to identify as veterans. When asked for satellite vet office, we were told that there were less than 1,000 vets in area, and then realized that this issue may be about not identifying.

- Joining forces get together, one of VFWs in northern Idaho seeing same issue of vets not identifying. Started putting ads in newspapers about DO YOU KNOW A VET – family and friends able to call in and refer those who were struggling, they have not had a suicide in area in 3-4yrs now.

American Legion – struggle with people not understanding that all these providers are here at no cost to you! Whenever I see younger vets, I ask if they are connected. I tell them this is not Vietnam era VA, they are stepping up. If you want a military you have to take care of your vets. I think we need to get to them on one-on-one basis, if not for you, for your family. The system has changed.

WSU - disheartening to hear how few of our county's vets are registered with VA

- Answer about how do we identify these vets. How do we catch those who are not VA. On DD214 there is box to check about sending to county, home of record etc. Not all check, but how do we get copy of this list? We hear from word of mouth.
- In outreach have found that a lot don't think they are veterans. We have changed question to have you or family ever served in military? And another misconception is that they don't need or don't deserve benefits, what they don't know is that the more enrolled means more money for state to help.

Response David Puente – Department of War and VA are working closer at getting data at transition. About 2yrs ago there was policy change, allowing VA to participate now. It is a lot

better with TAPS. In our state we are about 33% service connected which is on par with national averages. So still 60% not captured. Especially in rural areas as this is a big portion of our state. DD214 checking box to send to home of record is now changed to an opt out. WDVA currently gets that data and information, in our state gov and Director Puente sends a letter to WA residents transitioning out. However, we don't get data on those who move out of state. They are now transferring medical records. Issue with the imposter syndrome for vets that didn't go to combat zone, does not matter, 1% of population raised hand to serve, they deserve their benefits. In our state we are working to get sharing agreements, they may not want to self-identify, however somewhere along the way they interact with other state agencies and may have checked a box. Another part of this is the IT issues of protecting data privacy, ensuring we are only getting the relevant information we need. These conversations are great, this is a lot of great information of how we need to push and pull. As an agency we are working to get better at identifying vets.

Vet Center – those who served after 9/11 know full well they have services, the issue is vets prior to that. Prior to the Clinton admin you were not a vet if you never deployed, got a medal, and within community there was an attitude that sometimes put down those who did not meet this. Often those older vets you need to meet one on one with facts, not sentiment, that yes they are vets and served. Definition of veteran changed and these older folks are holding onto the very first definition they heard. We NEED to get info out to our vets, things change! And if you are here please reach out to your peers, they listen to peers more than younger people. They ignore mass media, but they listen to the American Legions etc. Educate yourself, things change constantly and you need to stay updated and make sure when you speak to your fellow vets you are speaking current truth.

#2 QUESTION- what support or partnerships would make the biggest difference over next 12 months?

Summary:

- *Outreach to vets where they are, outreach to spouses, more education*
- *Continue to connect and update resources to common databases/directories*

- *Rural grant partnerships strengthened*

Full conversation:

Hear from vet here today – separated from Navy in 2013 don't know if checked box off in TAPS, was at home of record for 4months, then moved out of state, applied for benefits and never heard anything, moved twice and reapplied again and again and never heard anything. Now I am here, lost my job 9 months ago and here because I need to try the VA process again. To you all here today, I never heard of any of you before, I don't have a lot of hope for this process, it's hard to see return on investment for effort to get assistance.

- Speaking as a spouse and child of vet. My father was desert storm; it took me dragging my dad to VA to get him to sign up. I am on spouse's page, none of the spouses know what to do, and this is important, we need a mix of continuing the 9/11 programs but reaching out to the bases and national guard etc. Our office has been working on more outreach; education is one of the biggest steps to removing barriers for older and new vets.

WVAC – I served 35 yrs in army. I was a legal administrator, and I did not know about any of this, I thought VA was only the “big VA”. Navy Veteran, you resonate with me, you used a word that we all need to remember here, the “hellscape” of VA, we all have the power to change that.

- A barrier to vets is the overwhelm of information, would committee consider maintaining 1-800 number or something that would prescreen all these services, “you need hearing help and live in county, press x number” some sort of triage number that helps

Discussion of veteran's frustration with phone tree type tools and how discouraging it can be vs direct outreach being more effective. WDVA website has a resource page, if you are a resource provider and if you don't see yourself on that, please reach out to us and we will get you added.

Leland – outreach is most important phone trees and programs mean nothing if they don't know they are there, go out to community meet vets where they are, listen and learn and share

Patient Advocate – vets HATE phone trees, you don't get where you need to go, 9x out of 10 they end up in my office because they can't get ahold of anyone in primary care.

Rural resources for outreach – second this, we have been doing outreach at libraries, transport is still issue as we keep discussing, meet people where they are at.

- Can't solve issue today, wish we could, but until we can get it solved, please call me. Doesn't matter what era. As a vet I WANT to help, I have a direct line 509-434-7286 no phone tree.

Councilman – resource guide is up and current PalouseResources.org have at least 12 up to date sites for vets covers everything from suicide prevention to housing.

Employment Security – Work source (WA version of American job center), JBSG grant, case managers work one on one with vets who have significant barriers, have to have served 180 + days, does not have to be service-connected disability. We also refer to outside resources. Yes Vets program is an employer recognition program. We have a website and staff in every office any questions please ask.

Self Rep Vet -at federal and state level there are vet benefits for agricultural programs. I have asked about those at my local office and have been told you need to talk to VA. It's been a real difficult process in Whitman County, is there a way I can get help?

David Puente – will connect with veteran today and provide info on rural program. He encouraged him to reach out to the Dept of Commerce and Agriculture as they have grants as well.

Closing and Meeting Adjourned

Thank you everyone for coming! As we close conversation, we got a lot out of this new format, we usually talk at you, asking questions, our strategic plans and convos about how we can use the information you shared today and how we can help. We know we need to come out and have these conversations in person, so we can meet and determine how best to serve the almost 2 million individuals in state who are related to military. We bring in 3.7 billion to the state economy that is related to VA. This is a big dollar amount that is being spent by our vets in their communities. We have staff throughout the state, please reach out.

- We have a survey, please complete for a \$50 gift card.

- Recognition Certificate of Appreciation presented.
- Thank you again to all who organized.
- Transition to resource fair now.

Adjourned at 11:45AM – move to Resource Fair