

Highlights 2019 Serving Those Who Served Conference

Thank you VRAB members for paying for my trip to the Conference. Following are the highlights, as I saw them, based on the plenary and breakout sessions I attended. For your benefit, the PowerPoint Presentations for subjects at the conference are available on-line at www.dva.wa.go/program/serving-those-who-served-conference.

Plenary Session; Untangling PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injury; This session was way over the head of many of the attendees, very clinical research oriented. What's important though is; PTSD and TBI have some similarities but are very different and a veteran may be inflicted with both. TBI is very big among our Middle East wars veterans. It is good to know the VA is actively researching and studying PTSD/TBI to deliver better treatments.

Breakout Session; SOARing Out of Homelessness. SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, Recovery. A very informative session. The SOAR presentation was preceded by an overview presentation highlighting the characteristics of homeless veterans. SOAR is a Social Security Administration program designed to assist homeless or at risk of homelessness individuals, including veterans. SOAR can be an expedited process for obtaining disability benefits. SSI/SSDI recipients are eligible for healthcare and cash payments. They may also participate in the employment programs of PASS and Ticket-To-Work. A person can become SOAR certified by completing an on-line training course. This is something we, as a board, should encourage. That is to have SOAR certified people available to assist our homeless or near homeless vet's and to publicize this program. Very applicable to vet's homeless and with mental illness or substance abuse disorder. Does not stop eligibility for VA disability compensation.

Breakout Session; Employment and Apprenticeships. Very good presentation highlighting the Washington Labor Market and employment and apprenticeship opportunities for veterans. The State recognizes and encourages businesses to hire veterans and does a lot of work to help veterans transition from the military to the civilian workforce. Noteworthy is the staffing of a State Job Center on JBLM. I also liked the information on labor market needs, especially that a college degree is not necessarily what every business is looking for when hiring. A big market for fixer's, builders, crafts and trades people.

Plenary Session 2; A Journey of Hope; Washington's Suicide Prevention Strategies. What can I say, suicide is not painless and far too many veteran's have taken their lives. A message here is

to encourage those at risk to seek help. For many it is hard to overcome the stigma and fear associated with admitting a problem.

Breakout Session; Justice Involved Veterans. This was a good presentation provided by the Dept of Corrections. There were some interesting statistics provided about incarcerated veterans. They are; generally older than the general population, a greater percentage are white compared to the general population, drug use and drug related offenses are lower but their crimes tend to be more violent than the general population. Veterans Courts have been successful but about 9% of prison population is veterans. Many have diagnosed mental illnesses. One facility is operating a pilot program where veterans are housed in a dedicated mod. The daily regiment and opportunity for programs seems to work. Effort is taken to prepare the vet for transition to freedom with an established handoff to civilian resources.

Breakout Session; Less Than Honorable Discharges. Presented by Northwest Justice Project, upgrade can be a cumbersome process but has benefits. Upgraded character of discharge can open the door to state and federal benefits. Many who have been successful had a discharge where PTSD or mental illness played a role, either diagnosed or undiagnosed at time of discharge. The VA has nothing to do with upgrading discharges. Solely through service channels. Important, anyone discharged for mental health reasons, regardless of character of discharge, may be eligible for VA mental health services.

Breakout Session; Veteran's Levy and How Counties Serve Veterans with the Veterans Assistance Fund. (I attended this on Day 1 so it is out of order in this report). Dept of Revenue gave background on establishment of levy to include minimum and maximum amounts. Levy and amount of fund is of course based on available taxation. That is populated areas can tax less and get more revenue than the very rural counties. Garfield County does not have a levy. It was pointed out to beware of HB 1718 and 1829 which could impact monies for the Veterans Fund. HB 1829 gives more protection to the ability to tax for the Veterans Fund. We were also given a spreadsheet, 2018, County Veterans Assistance Fund Overview, which gave statistics on number of vets/families served, levy rate, fund budget and who/how it is administered for each county. There was no information available for Walla Walla. Meghan DeBolt has been notified and WDVA point of contact provided.

The remainder of this session consisted of program information sharing from two County VSO's; Eric Fritts of Okanogan County and Tony Sandoval of Chelan County. They serve primarily rural counties and are deeply involved in the administration of VRF monies. There was quite a bit of discussion on what works and problem areas. Noted that counties administer their funds in various ways and not all contract with a third party like we do. Asotin County is begging for a

VSO to serve their vet population. They are relying on help from another state (Idaho), in some instances. Along this line, Washington is prepared to fund two VSO positions for a two year period.

Sincerely,

Richard Best

VRAB Member.