



# Veteran Assistance Commission of Will County

Kristina McNichol – Superintendent  
Glenwood Center 2400 Glenwood Ave. Ste 110 Joliet, IL 60432  
Ph: (815)740-8389 Fax: (815)740-4329



**10 Aug 2021**

**Commission Meeting**

**7:00 AM**

*VAC meetings will be offered via videoconference/telephonically through the ZOOM Meeting platform & in person at VAC Office. Some VAC Will County Board Members will attend meetings remotely and the general public is strongly encouraged to do the same. If a member of the public would like to attend the meeting virtually, please send an email to [vacwc@willcountyillinois.com](mailto:vacwc@willcountyillinois.com) and a link will provided.*

- I. Call to Order: President Picciolo @ 0700
  - A. Pledge of Allegiance
  - B. Opening Prayer: Chaplain Singler
- II. Roll Call of Attendees: Secretary

VAC Commission		
Attendee Name	Title	Status
Jack Picciolo	President	P
Nicholas Barry	Vice President	P
Denise Williams	Secretary	P
Amanda Koch	Sgt-At-Arms	P
Jim Singler	Chaplain	P
Tom Mlynek	Member	P
Janet Blue	Member	P
Steve Benicke	Member	P
Vic Martinka	Past Chairman	P
John Kestle	Past Chairman	P
John York	Past Chairman	A
Wayne Horne	Past Chairman	A

- III. Introduction of Guests and/or First Time Attendees:

- A. [Senator Duckworth](#) Q & A Session (attached):

Viviana Gonzalez, Stacey Berdejo

Ms. Gonzalez-Bills to bring back deported past service members, track noncitizen past service members going through deportation process; authorize DHS to grant parole to deported past service members so they can access VA services in the US

Ms. Beredjo-many believed they were naturalized, did not have help needed to access naturalization; they didn't know if they plead guilty they would be deported; ICE does not track past service members, system is in place but is not equally accessed; some ICE judges do not know/factor in past service member's service in their sentencing/deportation; some were at the last step in naturalization, offenses were drug offenses/no longer offenses; deported past service members do not have access to parole to attend their appointments

- a) Discussion

Submitted Questions-

**1. What is the current mechanism by which active service members of the military apply for Citizenship?**

Ms. Gonzalez-current hostility since 9/11, is expedited; only need to serve 1 day of active duty; process changed under last administration, added extra service to 180 days(struck down); process N400 and N426-

current statute has to have honorable conditions, other is ineligible; only 4 locations across the world where service members can take the oath; active service members only allowed to take oath outside the US; Ms. Berdejo—a statistic says it's harder for service member to naturalize, USCIS should make it easier due to ability to expedite, harder to coordinate, needs Congressional action;

## **2. What has the senator's team done to reach across the aisle to motivate republican colleagues to sign?**

Ms. Gonzalez—seems to be more interested in a more proactive approach, submitted a request to government accountability office to look into why veteran/active duty members seeking/attaining citizenship; GAO is in process of starting review, identify where the faults lie, is a bipartisan request; interest falls off for those who have already been deported or them to access VA benefits; Duckworth views the criminal record separate, they should have had access while active duty which would have prevented deportation; past 45 days was a judiciary subcommittee meeting, first time;

## **3. What does the senator see as a barrier to getting this bill signed into law?**

Ms. Gonzalez—need 60 Senators, some interest in military naturalization, more opposition to returning/paroling/pardoning those already deported; working on partnering with House Democrats;

## **4. Is there a requirement in the proposed legislation that the discharged veteran hold an Honorable discharge?**

Ms. Gonzalez – any current member it is honorable conditions, legal challenge currently what is “honorable”; outside scope of these bills.

## **5. Has the senator signed the bill?**

Janet Blue expounded—did not realize the bill was signed, appreciated the information; if someone comes to us w/a specific case, where do we go, who do we contact?

Ms. Gonzalez directed to Senator's website “Need help with Federal Agencies?” to get question/concern routed to correct person; can call office; can reach via email; distribute the information to the veteran community, can refer to other agencies/attorneys who do pro bono work

Ms. Berdejo— correct misinformation about why past service members were deported, a lot were due to administration/paperwork issues, past service members don't know/didn't know; understand how difficult it is for active duty members to naturalize, e.g., eight months; Senator believes this affects military readiness due to service members co

## **6. How can we help?**

Ms. Berdejo—not sure of how many deported veterans, surprise there are several, many; cases were drugs, addiction; two cases of no criminal record, left the US couldn't return though they thought they were naturalized; help by understanding there are things in the immigration system are not working, noncitizen service members are at risk; Duckworth said while she was in Iraq she helped was in charge of helping with their process; cases have been referred to other organizations/veteran organizations to help w/individual cases, Senator's office does not have the manpower; request helping push legislation on State level, call legislators at State and Federal level, will connect WCVAC to others who are assisting

McNichol – asking for a “veteran's preference”

Ms. Gonzalez—under current law, not allowed but there is judicial prosecutorial discretion; bill wants ICE/DHS to track; states policy exists, not being followed/consistently followed; making sure military naturalization is smooth/consistent; provide a pathway to come back to the US;

McNichol— does the DHS application ask about military service

Ms. Gonzalez— DHS has 4 different components, each sets their own policy, guidance; ICE, USCIS has their own internal policies, approaches to track, each is internally accountable; GAO has stated they are not following their own policy, not tracking, immigration judge doesn't have the opportunity to take military service into consideration;

Picciolo – how many of these cases are criminal vs paperwork issues?

Ms. Gonzalez—there is no solid number, conservative estimate close to 1000; some organizations think it is a few thousand that have been deported/declined reentry; because there are many, and lack systemic tracking we don't know, only know of anecdotal from experience;

Picciolo —is it a law, is it automatic that service members attain citizenship?



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Ms. Gonzalez – recruiters often refer to 1, 2 years they will be naturalized, got the paperwork going, mistakenly believe DOD does the paperwork, this is not true; a lot of administration paperwork failure, not the fault of the service member; current administration pushing various Federal entities to look at this issue; Ms. Gonzalez – AL has endorsed on a national level, Ms. Berdejo will available for interim questions.

- IV. Minutes of Previous Meeting (13 July @ 7:00 AM)
  - A. Motion: approved, Horne, Mylnek; unanimous
  - B.
- V. Superintendents Report:
  - A. Financial Assistance May – July 2021
    - Asst. Sup. Solum – about on par for this time of year
      - a) Shelter: \$5254
      - b) Water: \$362
      - c) Electricity:
      - d) Gas: \$162
      - e) Food/Personal Needs: \$750
    - B. Award Log: \$84.5M since 2015 as of 08/01/2021  
Papineau advised is \$86.2 million as of 8/09/2021
    - C. Project 165 Report Valerie Tawrel
      - McNichol advised winding down, out of FEMA/United Way money, linking to other community partners; American Rescue dollars request from \$300k; working w/DCEO received \$130k, meeting to use that money as emergency shelter due to lags w/new building; using that money to back pay, will have \$65-70K to use for emergency housing; at 84% housing success rate, 150x better than national trend; McNichol advised FEMA and local EMA are completely separate, EMA in Will County is Red Cross, are not Covid-related; Tawrel is on local boards to build relationships; McNichol advised currently 4 veterans, referrals from VA
- VI. New Business
  - A. Habitat For Humanity Ray Holloway House; Romeoville Post Commander Steven Daley
    - Daley advised partnership w/Habitat for Humanity was fairly simple, went from large project to help w/a single family; Sams's club Romeoville gave \$20k; Cornerstone wanted to build a 100-120 unit facility, was out of scope but perhaps a future project; new program for veterans thru Habitat, same requirements as existing Habitat programs; a member of AL fit, is current recipient
      - a) Can this be duplicated?
        - Habitat seeks one major donor/partner for each project;
        - Picciolo – help w/volunteers to Daley or Habitat; will provide phone for Habitat contact, Cheryl Touhy
        - McNichol advised VAC works w/Habitat, advised each recipient puts in 250 hours, AL, VFW posts can organize volunteers to go for those 250 hours. Habitat recipients own free and clear after 10 years, can then rent house to another.

McNichol suggested AL, VFW make these District level projects  
McNichol also has a “women’s build” program, help learn about the program, spread awareness.

B. Veterans Day Ceremony; Will County Court House

McNichol advised Atrium of Will County Court House reserved to VAC-specific event, will be invite-only, will have Portrait of a Soldier display;  
on 11/11 at 11:00am

VII. Old Business

McNichol advised DCEO grant to build gym, County to fix AC system, roof; grant money must be used by Dec. 2021, will seek different grant from general fund to use as needed; could use for salaries, will now not be using DCEO grant for build-out of gym; states current goal is to be in new building by May 2022, tba.

VIII. For Good of the Commission/Public Comment

McNichol advised to share post news/events with VAC to be put in the Farmers Weekly  
Mylnek advised veterans appreciation day on Aug 14 2p-10p at Bolingbrook Recreation Center, looking for volunteers to work booths; Bingo at Plainfield every Thursday

Picciolo advised need a 2 week lead for Farmer’s Weekly

A. State of the County (attached)

McNichol advised these are the VAC facts for Bertino-Tarrant to share in State of the County

IX. Motion to Adjourn: made, Horne, Martinka; unanimous

**VAC Executive Committee Meeting**

**9/14/2021 @ 7AM**

**In Person:**

**2400 Glenwood Ave STE 110 Joliet IL 60435**

**OR**

**VIA Zoom**

**<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/88276899609>**