

**Veterans’ Service-Related Ailments Task Force
Meeting Minutes
March 14, 2022, 12pm-2pm**

1. Call to Order and Roll Call

- a. Meeting called to order by Summer Padoan at 1212
- b. Roll call taken and quorum established with 9 members at roll call
- c. IDVA staff members present: Anthony Vaughn, Kourtney Hopkins, Alicia Utterback, Sara Augustinas, Crystal Womack

Senator Wilcox	Present
Representative Kifowit	Present
Representative Swanson	Not present at roll call
Director Prince	Present
COL John Fulk	Present
Christopher Spears	Not present at roll call; joined at 1215
Eric Butz	Present
Kimyada Wellington	Present
Michael Iwanicki	Not present at roll call; joined at 12:23
Michelle Ramlow	Present
Summer Padoan	Present
Timothy Alexander	Not present
William Sutton	Present
VACANT	
VACANT	

2. Reading and Approval of Minutes from February 28, 2022

- a. Summer Padoan- Meeting Minutes from February 28, 2022, were distributed on March 4, 2022. Are there any concerns or recommended changes? None heard. Meeting Minutes from February 28, 2022, stand approved as distributed.

3. Officer position discussion

- a. Summer Padoan- The Task Force wants to establish a Secretary position. Secretary will record minutes. Are there any volunteers?
 - i. Michelle Ramlow volunteered to serve as the Secretary position. No objections from the group. Michelle Ramlow is now the Secretary for the Veterans Service-Related Ailments Task Force.
- b. Summer Padoan- The Task Force wants to appoint a Judge Advocate who will be responsible for the full understanding of the Bylaws and ensures the Task Force remains in compliance with the Bylaws. Are there any volunteers?

- i. Eric Butz volunteered to serve as the Judge Advocate. No objections from the group. Eric Butz is now the Judge Advocate for the Veterans Service-Related Ailments Task Force.
- c. No further volunteers or objections from the members.

4. Old Business: Member discussion on common issues identified in the veteran community

- a. Padoan request group to share initial thoughts concerning the veteran community.
- b. Butz- legislation put forth is looking for a singular problem or group of problems that may be denied, not necessarily sure that there is a singular issue or group issue. Figure out how to help veterans get approved over the claims that they're putting in for on standard claims. What can the state of Illinois do that will facilitate more approvals? Ideas – a voucher system for attorneys, supplying legal services for appeals cases
- c. William Sutton- Veteran Service Officers are here to support veterans. Illinois does not have to give out vouchers because VSOs do it for free. The help is out there, but we need to narrow the scope tighter to focus on what exactly we can do, not necessarily what can be done on a federal level.
- d. Padoan- We don't have to have one singular answer. We can work on finding a way to propose a plan to the state to have more representation throughout the state for veterans.
- e. Michelle Ramlow- Identified a couple of specific issues; Contracting companies that do C&P exams don't always know what they're doing. Providers need better training on how to interpret veteran conditions and claim reviewers need to be trained better to understand ailment connections to service.
- f. Sutton- Michelle you are correct. Contractors need more training.
- g. Padoan- contract C&P examiners are federally funded but finding something the state can do is something that needs to be addressed
- h. COL John Fulk- Suggested practice- National Guard Soldiers provide a medical summary of their conditions with their timeline, so it makes it easier for the C&P examiners to review the history. Records can be volumes and a summary can help. Can someone provide the summary along with DD214 to help the examiners understand what the claim is and show a timeline?
- i. Padoan- having base-level training for veterans who may be making their claims on their own, having that supplemental information about occurrence may help streamline that process.
- j. Butz- disbursing information/outreach campaign to veterans about benefits, the state of Illinois can have volunteer at worksites that's willing to reach out to veterans at the worksite about possible benefits.
- k. Kimyada Wellington – Is there a database that shows disabilities veterans have been denied? If so, we can start by analyzing which is the most commonly denied conditions.

l. Padoan, Michael Iwanicki, Sutton- VACs internally talk to each other but not aware of a collective database.

m. Wellington- Consider creating a database and share the idea with others?

n. Iwanicki- Certain claims get approved and denied in cycles. Years ago, it was difficult to get a rating for mental health conditions, then hearing loss claims. It kind of cycles. It almost comes down to "What conditions are we having a problem with today?", in terms of approval.

o. Padoan - In the last 1-2 years noticed secondary musculoskeletal issues are frequently denied. I.e., bad right knee then left knee impacted. Examiners are citing studies saying it's not contralaterally indicated. When we can't use one and must compensate with the other. Perhaps more studies or more training to the examiners would help this issue.

p. COL Fulk- From a medical standpoint, it is well known in the medical community that contralateral problems based on one side that effects the other. Maybe there needs to be better training or recertification annually on the side effects of unilateral injury and what the secondary effects are.

q. Iwanicki-Supplements claims rules have changed, which lowered the standard for relevant evidence, but claims are still being held to a high standard.

r. Sutton-Question for Director Prince, is there an annual recertification for examiners? Nurse Practitioners are getting more involved in specialty exams even if it is not their specialty field. For example, I had a male veteran who was sent to an OBGYN to be evaluated for a leg problem.

s. Director Terry Prince- Will get back to you on that. NASDVA conference revealed that there aren't enough people available for examinations and the cases are becoming more complex. The average time to get a hearing face to face 730+ days. The VA is contracting a lot of that support. Will look into finding out if they need to be recertified but this is noted as an issue not only for the state but nationally.

t. Padoan - What I am hearing so far- Quality of C&P examiners, especially when it comes to contractors. They are contracted through the VA; the VA does provide extra "commission" or "bonuses" based on quality of exams. Is there somehow a way to come up with a proposal for the state to help balance that out? Can the state provide incentive for providers? Or can the state assist in making sure examiners in the state are properly training? Can the state require something separately from the federal government for certification or re-certification?

u. Sutton-the quality-of-care number one goal. There is a reporting process for veterans who feel the examiner may not have done something correctly.

v. Ramlow- I want to add-in general, as a veteran, especially our older veterans, they don't know if the medical professional is doing something wrong. They're not going to question the medical professionals until they get a response back from the VA stating

their claim was denied. The veteran doesn't know that they don't know what they're doing. What does right look like and how can we educate people on what to expect?

w. Iwanicki-We talk to the veteran about what they can expect when they go to the exam and contact them after the exam so they can tell us how it went and if there was something unusual, they can discuss with us. However, there are some things we don't know until after the rating. Educating the vet upfront on what to expect when you get there. It helps with a lot of things, but a lot of veterans don't go to an advocate first.

x. Padoan - Takes it back to the idea of having an education outlet on what to expect and how can the state help provide more representation and advocacy.

y. Director Prince- We need to statistically show veterans the difference between being represented by VSO vs without representation. Some of these veterans don't have 48 months to go through the process. We need to spread the message to veterans on not go into the process without someone on your six. We can explore more what we can do as a state. Will work with Mark Patterson to get clarification on the certification/re-certification of C&P examiners. I will be meeting with the Deputy Secretary of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs this week and can address some of these concerns.

z. COL Fulk-The C&P examiners operate under their own credentials. There is also privileging. I would say that if its specific medical issue that required specialist's evaluation, that provider should be privileged or credentialed in that specialty.

aa. Padoan - All examiners are privileged within the VA, despite their specialty. They are required to have the training within the VA to do certain exams. The C&P exams can be outside their practice, but as long as they are qualified in C&P training, they can perform the exam.

bb. Sutton-You have doctors who work for VHA who are scared to fill out DBQs because they're scared to lose their jobs. This is what I have heard.... The provider is essentially battling their own employer. Some are willing to put a note in the system but will not fill out DBQ. How can the state get involved in educating VHA providers that they are allowed to complete DBQs?

cc. Director Prince- it's concerning about the lack of continuity across the spectrum

dd. Sutton- veterans are starting to see specialists. It takes the stress off the veteran by allowing their providers complete DBQ. They feel they are being taken care of by their doctor. If the veteran doesn't feel comfortable, it adds extra level of stress and be a detriment to their health.

ee. Butz- Providers inside and outside of the VA are not willing to write a letter to the VA on veteran's conditions. I like the idea of trying to give Providers the incentive for quality exams. We need to better utilize some complaint/feedback avenues.

ff. Padoan -Anybody who hasn't had a chance to speak?

gg. Christopher Spears-It's important to get to the veteran before they go for their exam. We need to find a way to get information out to veterans that are coming off

active duty. How can we network to get the information out there about VSOs and claims? How do we get to the veterans to get to the VSO?

hh. Ramlow-Family member was a WWII veteran, what turned him off was having to sign a POA because he didn't understand the limitations of the POA. There is a general misunderstanding of the terms and how they're used. What about going to Reserve Centers. Sending a VSO to reserve center on a drill weekend to educate them on benefits and the process?

ii. Spears- Iraq and Afghanistan veterans also don't have this knowledge. I don't recall the claim process is being covered during out-processing. Can we get a list of the VSOs in the state of Illinois? How do we do that?

jj. Padoan -this falls under the outreach. Having the state be able to help. Reservists and National Guard can file a claim while they are still a member of the Reserves or National Guard.

kk. Spears left meeting 1:13PM

ll. Representative Kifowit-One of the things we looked at reentry program, one- or two-day information seminar and introduce VSOs and Illinois specific benefits. Congress is allowing veterans to inform their states of their return if they chose. Can we look at the information we get from the DoD and is there a capacity or desire to look at an in-house welcome to Illinois. One day training? Maybe small stipend for meal? This was something recommended by the Illinois Veteran Suicide Prevention Task Force a few years ago.

mm. Director Prince- There are two different TAPS class. We are pushing DOD to provide us this information and push it on DOD that they are responsible to prepare the SM to transition. VSO portfolios are overstressed. Every veteran needs to have a VSO and other professionals when they come to Illinois. That is going to come along with a bunch of hiring.

nn. Ramlow- Never heard about reentry to Illinois program. I came off active duty in 93 and it was death by PowerPoint but came back to Illinois and served in the Reserves. Veterans just keep going. We need to focus on educating veterans-what they need to be looking at from feet to back regarding claims. Regarding the reentry to Illinois program, I would love for that to be a major thing. We get a sponsor when we go to a new command. We should also have a sponsor or mentor when we come back to civilian sector.

oo. Director Prince- Love the idea of the sponsorship program. Why can't the VA give us the list of the veterans in our state? We are going to work with our VISNs who may be more able to provide us the names of the veterans in our state. The minute someone is enrolled in VA care, we should be contacted to start our outreach.

pp. Representative Kifowit- Are there other avenues of information we can explore? Secretary of State when veterans apply to the veteran identifier on their license? Or Illinois Veterans Grant? are there other avenues we can get that information?

qq. Kourtney Hopkins – Our current Memorandum of Agreement between IDVA and Secretary of State does not allow for data sharing outside of its intended purpose of confirming veteran status. I will revisit the MOA with our general counsel. We are also working on resuming our Welcome Home Letter to veterans that elected to share their information with the state.

rr. Sutton- When a new veteran applies for the exemption, the information is shared with the county VACs. Something like that would be great if we could make that if every county does that; to have the tax accessor share that information.

ss. Representative Kifowit- We need to be more proactive letter than just a letter. Hold training and have a lunch of something

tt. Padoan -TAPS is not standardized across the branches. Is the reentry program still running or disbanded?

uu. Representative Kifowit-It was a suggestion from Suicide Prevention Task Force under previous administration. It was identified as a gap and just listening to the conversation on this call it reinforces that it is still a gap. I am excited to work on this. Try to identify funding costs and get something like this to get up and running. Consider a stipend if they want to come.

vv. Padoan – We could consider this a Joint Task Force effort

ww. Sutton- Was that drafted up?

xx. Representative Kifowit- will send Suicide Prevention Task Force report to the group.

yy. Padoan – This will be a good foundation to build from

zz. Senator Wilcox left call 1:34PM, Iwanicki left call 1:35PM

5. New Business: Determine further course of action

a. Due outs—

i. Follow up about C&P recertification requirements

ii. Memorandum agreement with SOS

b. Initiatives to explore-

i. Training and Outreach to veterans; information on claims process

ii. Training Examiners Training (Training Incentives)

iii. VHA Provider Training and Outreach (DBQs, Nexus letters, etc.)

iv. Reentry to Illinois program

c. Padoan- What can we build into these programs and present to the state?

d. Padoan -any new updates from members?

6. Member Updates

a. Sutton- USDVA is presenting a rescheduling proposal VA. IACVACs sent off our comments regarding the rating systems with pros and cons. Everyone should look at them. COL Fulk-if you don't have it, we will get it to you. Don't be afraid to voice your opinions on anything.

COL Fulk- Do we have any information on campuses regarding veteran benefits/VSOs/Welcome to Illinois program? That would be a good place to start. A lot of people come off active duty, go right into college, using education benefits Is that a possible avenue?

Padaoan - I agree fully. Some of the universities and colleges have different information. This would be one of those outreach areas.

COL Fulk-I will speak with Army JAG on potentially having this information available at PHA events.

Butz- Has the department of veteran's affairs ever considered a low-level or mid-level mentorship program?

Padaoan -like the idea of a mentorship program. There are other organizations around the state that are interested in this initiative.

Director Prince-we can explore having a robust mentorship program. That's why IJF was created, to help make sure people don't get lost in the good sea of will.

Padaoan- Any other announcements?

7. Adjournment

- a. William Sutton-motion to adjourn
- b. COL John Fulk- seconds motion
- c. Summer Padaoan- Meeting Adjourned at 1:49pm

8. Next scheduled Meeting is April 11, 2022, 12:00pm-2:00pm

9. Resources provided in chat:

a. from William Sutton to everyone: 1:07 PM

www.veteransbenefitsillinois.org

b. from Terry Prince to everyone: 1:08 PM

<https://www2.illinois.gov/veterans/Pages/ServiceOffices.aspx>

c. from Stephanie Kifowit to everyone: 1:43 PM

<https://studentveterans.org/>