

Committee: House Oversight and Ethics Committee

Chairman: Rep. Ed McBroom

Hearing date: March 17, 2016

Testimony Summary

By: Mark Sutton

The American Legion, Department of Michigan
Public Relations, Director and Legislative Liaison

1. Accountability: Former Director Jeff Barnes is still a state employee, he resigned, but then was reassigned elsewhere in the State of Michigan.
2. The American Legion Department of Michigan supports an independent ombudsman, however, only if the funding for the position comes from another department. The Department of Military and Veterans Affairs continues to recover from years of armory maintenance neglect and the National Guard needs money for proper training and keeping our soldiers sharp as they continue to deploy. The Veteran Service Organizations cannot afford cuts in funding unless we do not want veterans to receive help with VA benefits. Funding for the homes needs to increase not decrease.
3. Contractor workers or State workers: We want competent and properly paid nurses to keep them from rotating in and out. If the State goes back to State workers, then be prepared to fund the legacy costs associated with that decision and give the administration the ability to remove poor worker performance immediately with endless appeals. If contractors are used make the best contract to support the veterans that staffs properly, and pays the workers a wage that encourages them to want to work at the home.
4. We agree with Rep. Graves remarks that veterans make better workers and that the State should hire more veterans who work in the medical/nursing field, however, in order to do that the civil service commission must change. They currently do not make it a point to select veterans for hire in the state of Michigan.
5. To questions about the Board of Managers. The Board of Managers were given the same reports as the legislators and

the MVAA did not include the board in their decision to move to Michigan Veterans Health System, the board read it in the newspaper. When the board hired Leslie Shanlin as CEO for both homes the MVAA did not inform the chairman until the morning of the announcement. The public act clearly states the board governs the home and the MVAA is responsible for administration of the home. Removing the previous director of the Grand Rapids Veterans Homes was administrative, hiring a CEO for both Michigan Veterans homes is a governing issue as well as the implementation of a Michigan Veterans Health System. The Commanders Group of Michigan are troubled by these actions and sent letters to General Vадnais, Governor Rick Snyder, and MVAA Director Jeff Barnes. We met with General Vадnais on the issue and he indicated he would look into it. His letter reply to the Commanders Group was not reassuring that it would happen again. The Commanders Group was about to take an additional step on the issue, when the Audit Report was released and Jeff Barnes was forced to resign. The Commanders Group will wait and see how the new leadership works with the board. Initial indications are good in the improved communications. Note: The Commanders Group agree with the purpose of the Michigan Veterans Health System and the CEO position, we disagree with how those items have been handled.

6. Certification for Medicare/Medicaid was brought up in the 2005 Audit Report on the Homes. The State is talking about it again. We ask that a workgroup be formed to decide if it is a good or bad idea. We do not understand the issue enough to support or not support the process. If it is decided to proceed then we ask that all the proper funding be put in place to make it complete. If it is decided not to then let's move on.
7. Talk has been going on for years about a building a third veterans home in Southeast Michigan. We are asking that a workgroup be created to move forward, the process for requesting Federal VA grants takes time, finding a place takes time. There is no time to waste and lowering the census in Grand Rapids will help to alleviate staffing issues at the home in Grand Rapids.
8. The Homes are in need a large portion of funding to fix the parking lot, to fix the bridge, and to fix many items to keep the homes safe and current. We ask that a workgroup

be assembled to identify the areas and immediately fund those fixes.

The Commanders Group understands this is a funding issue, we also cringe anytime proposals for \$750 million for new roads, \$450 million for Detroit Public Schools, and \$1.2 billion for Flint. Cuts will need to be made to make those happen since we have a balanced budget amendment and the past shows us that money can come from our veterans and our national guard. The two areas who are most deserving, one for being our heroes and the other for defending our State and Nation.

Whatever decisions are made please make sure it is funded properly now and in the future.