

Approved: 02/12/07
Date

MINUTES OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS, MILITARY AND HOMELAND
SECURITY

The meeting was called to order by Chairman Don Myers at 1:30 P.M. on February 7, 2007 in Room 241-N of the Capitol.

All members were present except:

Representative Dick Kelsey- excused
Representative Kenny Wilk- excused

Committee staff present:

Art Griggs, Revisor of Statutes Office
Athena Andaya, Kansas Legislative Research
Betty Caruthers, Committee Assistant

Conferees appearing before the committee:

George Webb, Executive Director, Kansas Commission on Veterans' Affairs

Others attending:

See attached list.

Representative Ruff moved, seconded by Representative Phelps for approval of Minutes of the House Committee on Veterans, Military and Homeland Security held on February 6, 2007 be approved.

Motion carried.

Chairman Myers opened hearings on **HB 2302 - Kansas Veterans Health Act.**

Chairman Myers recognized Art Griggs, Revisor to give an explanation of the bill. This bill is to cover a wider span than just the Persian Gulf War. The name would be changed from the Persian Gulf War Initiative to the Kansas Veterans Health Act and there would be changes surrounding the make up of the Board, when it meets, as well as tasks to be accomplished.

Chairman Myers requested Athena Andaya, Research, to check on funding for this program and whether there are ongoing appropriation funds available prior to working the bill.

Chairman Myers recognized George Webb who testified as a proponent for the bill. (Attachment 1) He stated that although it might be helpful for the board to have more time to approve the changes in the bill, he had notified them of the changes and he is hopeful of this going through this session so the board make-up could be changed. George noted another concern which was the board meeting six times annually. He believed that would be a stretch and quarterly would be better.

Chairman Myers closed hearings on **HB 2302.**

Chairman Myers announced that there would be no meeting for this Committee tomorrow.

Chairman Myers adjourned the meeting at 2:05.

Next meeting is scheduled for Monday, February 12.

TESTIMONY REGARDING HB 2302
George Webb
Executive Director, Kansas Commission on Veterans' Affairs
February 7, 2007

Committee members,

Thank you for the opportunity to present information on HB 2302 before you. This bill seeks to amend earlier statutes regarding the Persian Gulf War Veterans Health Initiative (PGWVHI). The Kansas Commission on Veterans' Affairs stands in support of changing the direction of the initiative in order to be more in line with current operations.

When the Kansas Legislature began this program, its intent was to take a hard look at the veterans of the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf War and examine the affliction of some with what became known as Gulf War Illness (GWI). Using Kansas veterans in a detailed study, this program concluded that participation in the Gulf War, in and of itself, manifested significantly higher incidents of GWI. Because at that time the fact of GWI was not universally accepted, I believe strongly that the Kansas study jump started the Nation.

Following the study, SGF for the program dwindled, and by SFY 2004, there were no funds in the program. Despite the existence of a board and no sunset clause to the initiative, the absence of funding meant that the board could not meet – even to determine if it should declare victory and stand down. We did get additional appropriations, and the board has met regularly.

Along the way, the board and the Kansas Commission on Veterans' Affairs began to see that troops in current operations (Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom) were experiencing different problems than those who served in the earlier war. In particular, many of the medical maladies in the GWI category were not presenting. However, due to the nature of the current war, troops are experiencing many more mental health problems, especially PTSD; traumatic brain injuries; and amputations.

The board came to feel that addressing these new problems was important, but the original charter of the PGWVHI was problematic. The earlier statute was not clear about an end date of the conflict, because the statute preceded the ongoing war. The makeup of the board, especially the medical/technical members, was geared to GWI and not current injuries, and even the name left in question the mission of the board. For that reason, the amendment of the statute is before you.

I would tell you that due to the fast-moving nature of the bill processing, my Commission has not had the opportunity to consider all aspects of HB 2302. However, the Commission has been apprised of the potential change in direction.

Some of the membership qualifiers on the proposed board will need to play out, but we believe there is adequate flexibility to address that. I would advise the committee that a

requirement of meeting six times annually is probably a stretch. Besides the cost of travel, we suspect, as we found with the earlier board, that good people are busy people, and their schedules are full. Meeting quarterly is more appropriate.

This amendment also recocks the earlier study, using the same database of veterans from the earlier one. The board feels this would be helpful not only to Kansas veterans, but also as a measuring point once again for the Nation. If funded, we believe this would be helpful.

I am a Gulf War veteran, and I have not had any of the maladies in GWI. But I do believe that GWI is real, for I have seen my brothers in arms who were afflicted. And of course, troops today are experiencing some terrible wounds – and multiple tours create great numbers of mental health problems. We can and should do more for these veterans. I am under no illusion that making this change will create an instant remedy, because most of the care for these men and women will come from the federal government. But to the degree that we can assist the federal government with facts and concern, and to the degree that we can bring state resources to bear, our troops need our help.