

County seeks solutions for veterans concerns

New door handles, additional area for people to wait, appointment-only hours being considered

BY BRIAN WILSON
NEWS EDITOR

Members of the newly reorganized Taylor County Veterans Services Committee focused on addressing the needs of serving area veterans going forward as they met with staff on Friday afternoon.

Discussion focused on improving the physical office space to ensure privacy and address office operations while also touching on issues that led to this point.

Following last month's confrontational meeting, county board chair Jim Metz changed the committee makeup replacing the previous members with himself and supervisors Rollie Thums and Lester Lewis. Lewis is serving as chair of the committee.

At the start of the meeting, Lewis made a statement to the staff and the audience of about 20 area veterans and supporters who were in attendance. "There will be no repeat of the last meeting. We respect your service to the country and we respect you and we want the same in return," Lewis said.

He cautioned them that if people became disruptive they would be given one warning and if they continued they would be escorted from the room.

Lewis also questioned Veterans Service Officer Shellie Shaw about her role in the previous meeting, noting that she had met with the group of veterans before the meeting and again after the meeting. "Do you feel you bear any responsibility for it getting out of hand?" Lewis asked.

Shaw replied that it was her understanding it was the committee chairman's job to run the meeting. "I didn't feel like I was in a position to overstep my bounds," she said.

Lewis also questioned Shaw's comments reported in the minutes from the prior meeting about the personnel committee and concerns that they would be biased. Lewis asked if she had ever raised any concerns with members of the personnel committee or even knew any of the members of the committee, going on to point out that both he and Thums are members of the personnel committee.

Lewis emphasized that the goal is to assist Shaw and the office service the veterans as well as she can, noting the quality work that has been done in the office. "We want that to continue, we value our veterans," he said.

A point of contention for the office has been its practice in recent months of having the office door closed and asking people to knock to enter and, at times, having the

door locked. Lewis noted that he had nothing but respect for Marie Albers, the person who previously worked in the office for more than 30 years, and noted that in the many years of her working there, it was only during COVID that she would have the door closed. "She was uncomfortable during COVID so the door got shut," Lewis said, noting that prior to that the door had always been open.

Thums agreed and said in his 12 years of serving on the board, he had not seen the outside door closed. He said he totally understood the need for privacy protections, but questioned if there was a way to do that without closing the whole office.

"We are not Jeff and Marie," Shaw said referring to her predecessor Jeff Hein and Albers.

She explained the intention is to protect the privacy of the veterans. She explained that when someone calls the office, benefits specialist Nikki Sherman will get their names, social security number and other identifier information to screen them and see if it is appropriate to develop a claim.

Shaw continued with a hypothetical example of a Vietnam veteran who has prostate cancer and who goes on to talk about having erectile dysfunction and hyperthyroidism and other conditions which may be linked to a service related condition. Shaw said she needs this information as well as banking information and other to get the forms filled out completely and a claim filed.

According to Shaw, Sherman is the one who takes the bulk of the phone calls and is on speaker phone for this as she takes the information. Other times Shaw and Sherman work cooperatively in the office. "We are in constant communication," Shaw said. "She is an extension of me."

According to Shaw, the need for privacy is important for her to talk with the veterans so that they know they are in a safe space. She also said she would not allow interruptions when she is working with a veteran.

"I am going to lock the door for the super sensitive stuff," she said, noting these meetings could take two to three hours as the veterans work to chase thoughts. "It is exhausting work," she said, adding that it is also exhausting for the veterans.

In addition to office practices, there is also the physical office concerns. The courthouse is an historic building and there are limitations to the changes that can be made in the older portion. However, Lewis said he wanted to get a lever style handle on the office door since the current knob can appear to be locked even if it is not. He noted there are veterans who have enough trouble opening doors already and they should do this to improve access.

Another suggestion Lewis had was expanding into the office space across the hall from the veterans service office. Lewis said the space is expected to become empty

soon as the person in it moves into the second floor area near the judge's office. He suggested that the outer portion of that office could be used for a waiting area when Shaw and Sherman are working with clients so that they do not have to wait in the hallway.

Thums also suggested getting Sherman a headset for her telephone rather than being on speakerphone as a way to improve privacy by not having the veteran's information able to be heard. "To me it is more service than having the door shut," Thums said.

County register of deeds Jaymi Kohn, who was attending the meeting as a concerned citizen, said she has been told by the information technology department that there are no headsets that will work with the "anti-quoted" phone system in the county. She noted this is a problem as the headsets used in her office are beginning to have issues.

Shaw suggested having set days where she would have walk-in clients and others that would be solely by appointment. She cited the office's annual report showing the growing volume of successful claims and overall traffic to the office.

Lewis said he could see that would be more efficient to set up some days that were appointment only, but was concerned that it could discourage people from coming in. There was also the question of what would happen if there were cancellations.

Shaw said they would use the time to catch up on other claims. She suggested the best days for appointment only hours would be Thursdays and Fridays and noted the most walk-ins occur on Mondays and Tuesdays.

Thums raised concern about tracking and documentation. He said it is one thing to say you are busy it is another to have documentation showing they are. "We all need to be efficient at what we do," he said.

"I think over 80 claims in seven months speaks a lot to that," Shaw said. She explained that filing a claim starts with the conversation with the veteran which can take hours and then they have to gather medical records and write a narrative to support the claim. This may also involve doing medical research to connect it to the service-related issues.

"It takes a lot of work," she said, noting that if she is interrupted it could lead to mistakes, which could impact people's livelihoods. "You don't want to mess up," she said.

"I don't envy your job," Thums said. He asked for Shaw to prepare a proposal on having walk-in days and appointment-only days.

The only formal action taken at the meeting was to approve the annual report for the veterans service office. Lewis noted there may be other changes coming to the committee in the future such as expanding it to a five-person board and including a lay member on it from the community.

School looks at meal allowance increase for out of town meetings

EMILY GOJMERAC
REPORTER

There was some discussion among the members of the Medford Area Public School District (MAPSD) Policy Committee on Wednesday afternoon about changing the Professional Development Form & Guidelines. The category that was reviewed and adjusted was the amount of money that the district will pay towards the employee to go to mandatory training conferences.

The current policy that is in place for what the district will pay for teachers is:

- Registration
- School Vehicle
- Meals (if overnight)
- Lodging (if over 100 miles)

The Committee suggested giving the employees \$75/day if it's an all day event with three meals needed.

"If they are just going for breakfast and lunch, they will get \$50 for the day," said District administrator Pat Sullivan.

The Policy Committee will bring the suggestion to the school board's attention that some of the staff members have mentioned that it is hard to have 3 meals/day for only \$40/day. The suggestion was to have the dollar amount increased to \$75/day.

The same policies will be applied to coaches to attend coaching clinics and state tournaments.



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QUESTIONS? >

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