

VETERANS COUNCIL OF ST. JOHNS COUNTY

MINUTES OF GENERAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING January 25, 2024

CALL TO ORDER: Chairman Dudley

WELCOME AND OPENING REMARKS: Chairman Dudley

PLEDGE: Chairman Dudley

INVOCATION: Chairman Dudley

MINUTES OF LAST MEETING: Minutes of last meeting conducted December 28, 2023, were presented by Chairman Dudley. Copies of the Minutes and Agenda are available on the sign-in table and were sent to members electronically by the Secretary. The minutes were approved by voice vote with no changes.

TREASURER'S REPORT: Treasurer Mountcastle presented the Treasurer's Report to the Council. As of December 27, 2023, the cash balance was \$167,146.48. As of January 24, 2024, the balance is \$168,055.12. Treasurer Mountcastle went over the expenses of the Treasurer's Report in detail. It was announced that starting in May of 2024, The Dudley Foundation will administer two \$1,000 scholarships to students in our local high schools. Treasurer Mountcastle discussed the expenses that will be incurred with the year-end financials. Chairman Dudley asked if the Treasurer could provide as estimate of the total amount the Veterans Council spent last year helping veterans and that amount was \$77,000 directly to helping Veterans. The Treasurer asked if there were any questions regarding the Treasurer's Report. The Report was approved by voice vote.

SPEAKER:

CANDANCE MABRY, PRESIDENT, FIRST COAST HONOR FLIGHT Selena Hernandez-Haines, the former founding President of First Coast Honor 33 Flight, introduced the new President, Candance Mabry, who has been with the program since inception and will continue the honor to our Veterans. First Coast Honor Flight is a 501(c)3 non-profit that honors Veterans for their sacrifices. There are 125 Honor Flights across the nation and First Coast Honor Flight is the 10th hub in the State of Florida and the newest. First Coast Honor Flight covers the nine counties in NE Florida. In the 9-county area there are more than 168,000 Veterans. The Honor Flight "target" Veterans that have served in the Vietnam War, Korean War and WWII. Honor Flight provides a day of flight to Washington DC to visit the Memorials. Candance Mabry went into detail as to what is provided to the chosen Veterans on the Honor Flight that day. Each Veteran has a guardian/chaperone for the day that helps assist them with their needs as they make the tour of the Memorials. Honor Flight also provides a staff of six, one being a doctor. Flight Day starts incredibly early on the chosen day and

returns later that evening on the same day. It departs out of Jacksonville and flies into Washington DC. It is a busy day for all, and the Veterans not only appreciate the honor but also all that is included by First Coast Honor Flight. It was requested that if anyone should know of a Veteran that would benefit from the Honor Flight, they are asked to help them submit their application to be included in the future First Coast Honor Flights. They do not have to be Combat Veterans, just must have served during the war times. The floor was open to questions and answers regarding the organization.

INTRODUCTION OF NEW GUESTS: Chairman Dudley

COMMITTEE REPORTS:

VETERANS SERVICE OFFICE UPDATE, JOSEPH MCDERMOTT Mr. McDermott spoke of “good news” in a couple of areas. First, the National Personnel Records Center from March of 2020 to March of 2022, had a backlog of over 600,000 requests pending. The great news is that as of this date, there is no longer a backlog. This makes it much easier for the Veterans Administration 34 to obtain the needed records for filing claims. Second, the Veterans Service Office has two new Service Officers that are now certified with the Florida Department of Veterans Affairs and are allowed to take and submit claims to the Veterans Administration. It has made a huge difference in the operation of the office. Veterans can now get into to see the Veterans Service Officer within a week’s period. There has also been an Office Specialist hired to help with the phone calls and office interactions with the Veterans. The Veterans Service Office will see over five hundred Veterans for the month of January and will hit the number of one hundred new clients. The numbers continue to stay high. Mr. McDermott also discussed working with the Disability Questionnaire (DBQ). DBQ’s are completed by the Veteran’s doctor that is outside the VA so there is medical evidence to submit with the claim. There now has become a problem with false DBQ’s by doctor’s not filing it out completely, or filling out a DBQ for a Veteran in the State of Florida but the doctor is in another state. They are having to be looked at very closely in the Veterans Service Office and make sure the pertinent information has been submitted by the appropriate source. Another thing that is being looked at is “Claim Sharks.” These people are not certified to take claims or, “We’ll do this claim for you, but we want 3 months of what you are awarded.” Every county in the State of Florida has a Veterans Service Office and does not charge Veterans with filing claims. Mr. McDermott opened the floor to any questions regarding the Veterans Service Office.

VETERANS TREATMENT COURT, JOHN LESLIE John Leslie was not in attendance at this meeting due to a conflicting family event.

OLD/NEW BUSINESS: Chairman Dudley discussed the purchase of the hotel on Anastasia Blvd., The 35 Old Town Inn, and the hopes to close on that facility by mid-February and then it will become The Veterans Village. Chairman Dudley has been contacting Tallahassee and pushing them help get grant completed, which is tied up in legal, to help with this process. He also contacted Speaker Paul Renner and requested help. We are coming up against a hard deadline and the owner is getting nervous about the sale. Rep. Renner called back and informed Chairman Dudley that he “has lit a fire” to get this accomplished. Once the sale is closed, the facility can start taking Veterans in almost immediately. There are a few procedures that must be completed and are already in the works. The expense of currently having to house homeless Veterans in a hotel is high and having The Veterans Village will help with this expense. Chairman Dudley also spoke of the program, Students Against Child Trafficking, and bringing it to St. Johns County. With the migration of people crossing the borders and coming into our country illegally, there is a lot of trafficking of children because of it. A meeting was setup with the Sheriff ’s Office and Chairman Dudley was assured that Sherriff ’s Office would participate. The beauty of this program is that it is a Peer Program – a student to student program – to discuss the trafficking problem and it has been successful. It will be supported by Veterans. Chairman Dudley also discussed the scholarship program that was mentioned earlier in the meeting. The Veterans Council Board has met and decided that it will be named after the late Sargent Major Ray Quinn. It will start off with two high schools, St. Augustine and Nease High Schools, with ROTC programs. The schools will be provided with guidelines of what is expected and the instructors of those two programs will make the selection of the Cadet to be awarded. The floor was open to questions, answers and all others that had information to share with the Veterans Council. Next Veterans Council meeting will be held on Thursday, February 29th beginning at 7:00pm.

The meeting adjourned at 8:25 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

William Dudley, Chairman