

# The Cordova Times

## Veterans convene to address growing challenges

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Representatives from local, state and national organizations gathered for the first Alaska Veterans' Summit hosted by the Joint Alaska State Legislature Veterans' Caucus July 30 at the Dena'ina Convention Center to find solutions to critical issues identified by military veterans in Alaska.

After customary introductions of senators and representatives from the Legislature, and brief informational presentations by Alex Spector, director of the Veterans Administration, and Deborah Bitney, director of the Permanent Fund, co-chairs Sen. Charlie Huggins and Rep. Bill Thomas organized the participants into workshop sections. Immediate discussions ensued among the representatives of the Korean War Veterans Association, Alaska Territorial Guard Organization, Southeast Native Veterans and the Vietnam Vets Motorcycle Club, to name a few, addressing issues about expanding rural health care, enabling a true veterans hiring preference in Alaska, expanding Veterans Court, military transitioning from active to civilian status, and critical matters related to female veterans.

"Rural health care is the biggest challenge we face right now," Spector said as he explained how he is actively working with the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium to better deliver the services of the VA. However, he said the VA also is continuing to face the ever-growing challenge of an overtaxed system impacted by swelling demands of its members.

"More veterans are signing up for benefits because the word is out that the VA provides good health care — a compassionate effective health care," he said.

Diane Benson added her personal observations and concerns about escalating mental health issues in rural areas that continue to affect families.

"There are many communities that are not prepared to receive the veterans coming home," she said, and added that as a result of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, there is increased violence in rural communities as a result of mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder. She further stressed that families, especially from rural areas where services are often nonexistent, suffer the repercussions of PTSD and need protection, she said.

Others in her workshop group agreed, and several participants offered that traumatic brain injury is as important as PTSD and needs to be seriously addressed.

After an intensive day of testimony and discussions, the various summit committees submitted proposed action items with specific steps to address how to accomplish each item.

“The day was extremely productive,” said Josh Tempel, who was instrumental in organizing the groundbreaking event and is an aide to co-chairs state Rep. Bill Thomas and state Sen. Charles Huggins. Tempel will be responsible for compiling the recommendations of the committees for submission to the Joint Alaska State Legislative Veterans’ Caucus.

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