



Clark County Veterans Advisory Board Membership Handbook

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Based on Washington State Governor's Handbook

THE ROLE OF A BOARD MEMBER AND RESOURCES AVAILABLE

Citizen Participation through Boards and Commissions

Clark County's system of boards and commissions is fundamental to encouraging the use of citizen talent and interest in affairs of the county, keeping government innovative and responsive, and improving the performance of county services.

Our citizens have enjoyed a long tradition of participation in county government. Through representation on boards and commissions, Clark County residents are offered an important avenue to help create effective and equitable policies. Citizen involvement contributes to the success of government and the quality of life enjoyed by our families and communities.

Citizen participation works at all levels of government. It encompasses a broad range of issues, such as education, the environment and natural resources, general government, social services, economic development and transportation. Some boards appointed by the Governor shape policy for major state agencies and departments, others prepare regulations governing program areas, and some serve solely in an advisory capacity.

Veterans Advisory Board (VAB)

A VAB is required for every county in Washington State and was created by RCW 73.08.070. VAB members serve as advisers on policy matters to Clark County Community Services, which is responsible for administering policy. The VAB may study policy and make recommendations for changes or implementation. The VAB does not have authority to enforce policy or create rules, but their analysis and recommendations can play an important role in furthering the effective implementation of Veteran assistance.

The Advisory Role

Members of advisory boards provide an important link between the public and agencies, and the Clark County Council. The information that members provide about community needs and opinions can have a profound effect on policies and lead to better service. Advisory board members play a very special role in creating recommendations for Veteran services in Clark County.

If you are appointed as a member of the VAB, you will be expected to:

- Interpret and communicate community opinions, attitudes, and needs to Clark County Community Services and the Clark County Council.
- Study programs and services and analyze issues and needs.
- Offer proposals and recommend changes in programs, policies, and standards.
- Provide the public with information on county policies, programs, and budgets.

Veterans Advisory Board members support and counsel staff and make important recommendations about policy. They do not administer policy, programs, or services. When presenting recommendations, it is essential that board members keep the following in mind:

- Ideas should be expressed in clear and concise language.
- Proposed solutions should be viable and cost-effective.
- Recommendations should identify reasons for the changes suggested.
- Advice should reflect the views of a consensus or a majority of board members.

About Policy Making

As a board member, you are responsible for being knowledgeable about board policies and changes. Understanding the fundamental meaning and characteristics of policy is essential.

Policy is a written statement intended to be a guiding principle that defines an organization's intent and direction. It is most useful when set forth in broad terms so that it remains applicable and usable for a long period of time. It should not be so detailed that it dictates how, when or where things must be done. Policy should be stated clearly and concisely. Policy may be amended, rewritten or abolished. Thus, policy should be reviewed periodically to ensure that it remains appropriate.

Being an Effective Board Member

It is imperative that board members recognize they are in a critical position to shape and influence board decisions and actions. It is important that each member keeps informed and up to date on issues, legislative activity and statutes affecting the board.

Attendance. Regular attendance is essential so that decisions will represent the opinions of the board as a whole. In addition, regular attendance enables board members to keep abreast of board concerns and helps ensure that issues are examined from a variety of perspectives. The bylaws of the board define attendance requirements. A person may forfeit his or her position on the board as a result of poor attendance.

Preparation. Adequate preparation is another requisite for effective board membership. Your board's staff members will provide reports, proposals, and other information to help you make informed decisions. Do not hesitate to request additional information you need to make thoughtful and appropriate decisions.

In a nutshell, effective board members:

- Attend all board meetings.
- Are well prepared for meetings.
- Recognize that serving the public interest is the top priority.
- Recognize that the board must operate in an open and public manner.
- Are knowledgeable about the issues affecting the board.
- Examine all available evidence before making a judgment.
- Communicate well and participate in group discussions.

- Are aware that authority to act is granted to the board as a whole, not to individual members.
- Exhibit a willingness to work with the group in making decisions.
- Recognize that compromise may be necessary to reach consensus.
- Do not let personal feelings toward other board members or staff interfere with their judgment.

Resignations. If you are unable to complete your term, it is important to inform Community Services staff. A letter of resignation should be sent indicating the date your resignation is effective and whether you are able to serve until a replacement is named.

Staff Functions. The primary function of the board staff is to carry out the rules, policies and programs developed by the board. In addition, staff members notify board members of pertinent issues and legislative activity. They also arrange meetings, prepare meeting materials, compile background information and conduct research.

Staff members also serve as a liaison to other boards and agencies, the county attorney, the council and the public. Staff members are a valuable resource to boards. A good staff member can enhance the productivity and effectiveness of a board. Board members should not hesitate to ask staff for help in carrying out their responsibilities.

Legal Counsel. The County Attorney serves as legal counsel to the Clark County Council, department staff, and boards and commissions. The attorney advises and represents the county as it fulfills its official duties, issues legal opinions, and defends county officials and employees for actions performed in their official capacities and in good faith.

The county attorney provides valuable information and advice about statutes and legal issues. Community Services staff may request the following services from the county attorney as needed:

- Assurance that board decisions and actions fall within statutory authority.
- Questions about conflict of interest.
- Review of proposed regulations and revisions, and the drafting of such documents in legally correct language.
- General legal advice about board actions and activities.

LAWS AFFECTING BOARD ACTIVITIES

Restrictions and Requirements

There are certain restrictions and requirements that may affect you during your tenure as a board member:

- Board members must be familiar with and operate within their board's governing statutes and bylaws, as well as state and federal laws.
- To ensure accountability, all applicable policies and procedures adopted by the board should be in written form.
- No board member may make unilateral decisions or take action without the consent of the board as a whole.
- At professional or industry gatherings, or in other settings where appearance may be construed as representing the board, individual board members must use discretion to avoid the appearance of speaking for the board, unless specifically authorized to do so.
- Board members must keep in mind that their mission is to serve the public, and that it is inappropriate to use board membership to create a personal platform.
- Members are restricted by RCW 42.52.130, 140, 150 and 42.18.230 from accepting or soliciting anything of economic value as a gift, gratuity or favor if it is given only because the member holds a responsible position with the county.
- Questions about board issues should be directed to the board chair or county staff, who will see that all board members receive needed information by the next regular meeting.
- Details of board investigations, personnel files or business discussed at closed executive sessions should not be disclosed unless they are part of the public record.

Open Public Meetings Act

The Open Public Meetings Act applies to the Veterans Advisory Board.

Notification of Meetings. The Open Public Meetings Act requires that all meetings of the governing body of a public agency, as well as some other meetings on policies affecting the public, be open to the public. In addition, the public must be notified of such meetings in a timely manner.

If a quorum of the board members meets (or even emails) about board business without prior public notification, they are violating the OPMA. Board members also need to be aware of the perception of them meeting as well. This could cause issues, even if it's not a violation of the law.

Public Disclosure. The minutes of all regular meetings must be recorded and made available for public inspection.

Accessibility Requirements. To afford members of the public who have disabilities an equal opportunity to participate, meetings subject to the Open Public Meetings Act are to be held in facilities which are wheelchair accessible. Public notices about such meetings must include a statement that sign language interpreters, materials in Braille, large print or tape, and other necessary auxiliary aids will be provided with advance notice. Notices should include the name and phone number of the individual responsible for coordinating such requests. Refer to RCW 42.30.010 and 42.30.900 for more information.

Reasonable Accommodation of Persons with Disabilities

In addition to the Open Public Meetings Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) sets criteria for accessibility and accommodation. Under the ADA, people who have disabilities have a right to an equal opportunity for effective participation in the activities of boards and commissions, whether as appointed members or as members of the public.

Accessible Locations and Communications. Meetings and other board-sponsored activities should be held in wheelchair-accessible locations. Qualified sign language interpreters, materials in accessible formats such as Braille, large print and tape, and other forms of auxiliary aids for effective communications should be provided upon request. Reasonable modifications should be made to policies or procedures if they create a barrier to the full and equal participation of a person who has a disability.

To further support ADA requirements, the board and staff should:

- Provide regular notice to members, participants, and the public about ADA protections against discrimination based on disability.
- Conduct a self-evaluation to identify policies or practices that do not comply with the ADA and modify policies and practices if needed.
- Identify any physical barriers that limit the accessibility of programs, services, or activities to people with disabilities. If identified, describe methods and timeframe for eliminating those barriers.

Ethics and the Appearance of Fairness

As a board member, you are expected to uphold a high ethical standard. It is extremely important that board members avoid conflicts of interest or even the appearance of conflicts of interest. Using a public position for private gain is improper and illegal. Similarly, actions benefiting close relatives are prohibited. There are penalties for violations of state ethics statutes.

The following are examples of conflicts of interest:

- Directing contracts to a business in which you have a financial interest.
- Using confidential information for private investments.
- Accepting gifts or favors in exchange for certain regulatory rulings.
- Accepting gifts or favors in exchange for making certain purchases.
- Obtaining personal favors from employees.
- Accepting favors for disclosure of confidential information.
- Engaging in outside employment which assists non-governmental entities in their quests for business.

Board members can avoid conflict of interest issues by being aware of and adhering to statutory restrictions, using good judgment, and being fair and equitable in decision-making. For additional information on provisions of the state ethics law, visit the Washington State Executive Ethics Board website at www.ethics.wa.gov/.

BOARD TRANSACTIONS

The Veterans Advisory Board has a set of bylaws to direct and clarify its actions, procedures and organization. Board members are expected to adhere to bylaws and all relevant statutes.

Bylaws are the guidelines by which a board functions. According to Robert's Rules of Order, bylaws define the primary characteristics of an organization, prescribe how it should function, and include rules that are so important that they may not be changed without prior notice to members and formal vote and agreement by a majority of members.

Bylaws should include expectations as well as guidelines for members. Issues such as attendance, responsibilities and discipline should be addressed in the bylaws.

Quorum

A quorum is the number of members who must be present to conduct official business. If a quorum is not present, any business transaction is null and void. The quorum protects against unrepresentative actions by a small number of individuals.

The bylaws specify the number of individuals who constitute a quorum and whether a majority of this quorum may take action.

At meetings where a quorum is not present, the only actions that may be legally taken are to fix a time for adjournment, adjourn, recess, or take measures to obtain a quorum (such as contacting absent members).

The Chair and Voting

If the chair is a member of the board, he or she may vote just as any other member. When not a member of the board, the chair may vote whenever his or her vote will affect the outcome; or, to break or cause a tie.

A chair has only one vote and may not vote as a member of the board and as a presiding officer.

Voting by secret ballot is prohibited by the open meetings law.

Public Disclosure

County agencies and boards are required to have available for public inspection and copying their public records, such as procedural rules and statements of general policy, and other records, written or electronic, pertaining to the board's business. Exemptions to disclosure are limited and identified in statute.

Records relating to the conduct of official business are subject to disclosure even if they are on a personal computer. Records regarding advisory board business must be retained for six years.

For additional information on disclosure requirements and exemptions from disclosure, refer to Chapter 42.56 RCW or consult with the County Attorney.

Lobbying

There exists a fine line between advising and lobbying. It is important that board members be aware of this distinction. Board members are in a unique position that allows them to provide information and recommendations on issues. However, a board member becomes a lobbyist when he or she attempts to influence the passage or defeat of any legislation by council, or the adoption or rejection of any rule, standard, rate or other legislative enactment or any agency action under the Administrative Procedure Act, RCW 18.185.200, Chapter 34.05 RCW.

VAB members do not lobby on behalf of Clark County. Clark County has a lobbyist who takes direction from the Clark County Council.

Prohibition on Elections or Ballot Measures Using Public Resources. RCW 42.17.130 strictly forbids the use of public or agency facilities for the purpose of assisting a campaign for election of any person to any office or for the promotion or opposition to any ballot proposition.

The News Media

The news media has the important function of informing the public about government operations. In doing so, it provides a valuable communications link with the community. The county's Public Information Office (PIO) can assist with press releases or social media notices for newsworthy information. Any requests from the media about the Veterans Advisory Board or county-funded Veteran services, should be directed to Clark County Community Services staff.