



## Panel releases plan to help Alabama veterans with health, employment, homelessness, legal problems

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Mike Cason | [mcason@al.com](mailto:mcason@al.com) By Mike Cason | [mcason@al.com](mailto:mcason@al.com)

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**MONTGOMERY, Alabama** --- A state commission appointed by Gov. Robert Bentley released a plan today that officials said would improve and coordinate services for Alabama veterans and their families.

Among the goals are to reduce unemployment and homelessness among veterans, improve access to health care and help veterans with legal problems.

The plan was released today at the State Capitol at an event attended by members of the commission and others.

Bentley appointed the Alabama Veterans Executive Network Commission, also called Ala Vet Net, in December 2013, before the exposure of systemic problems at the U.S Veterans Administration became a national scandal.

A main purpose was to help Alabamians who have served during the more than 10 years of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and who have physical or psychological problems as a result.

Bentley said post traumatic stress disorder was one of the main problems.

"We want to do everything that we can for our veterans," the governor said. "That includes finding them a job. If they're homeless, finding them a place to live. If they have medical problems, making sure that they get quality health care."

Veterans Affairs Commissioner and retired Rear Admiral Clyde Marsh and Alabama Mental Health Commissioner Jim Reddoch led the commission, which included members from 16 other state agencies and organizations..

"They have paid the price," Reddoch said. "They are entitled to whatever we can do to meet their needs."

Bentley appointed Major Gen. Larry Ross, who is retired from the Georgia National Guard, as the coordinator to implement the plan. Ross will serve without pay.

Ross said there's a "sea of goodwill" among people to help veterans, and the plan will help put that into action. He said the initiative would not be a "flash in the pan."

Here are some of the points in the commission's plan.

- Identify health care resources and gaps and make that information available to veterans, service members and their families through a new website and social media. The website is expected to be launched next year.
- Reduce unemployment among veterans to less than 5 percent. Develop awards and propose tax benefits for companies that hire veterans.
- Reduce underemployment of veterans by promoting job training that helps veterans and other efforts.
- Propose legislation allowing in-state tuition for all veterans at two-year, four-year and technical colleges.
- Coordinate resources and agencies to help homeless veterans and prevent homelessness.
- Recruit lawyers to provide free legal assistance to veterans and service members.
- Promote the establishment of a statewide Veterans Treatment Court to help veterans with PTSD, anger management problems, drug addiction and other problems by offering alternatives to criminal prosecution.

The commission actually sent the plan to Bentley on June 30, which was the deadline set by the executive order setting it up.

Bentley spokeswoman Jennifer Ardis said the governor's office had worked since then to schedule an event to release it.

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