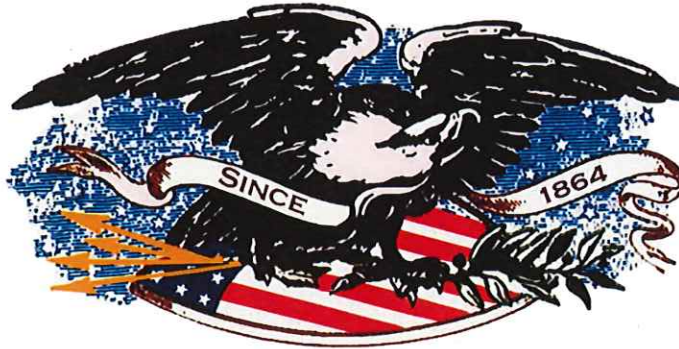


Connecticut Department of Veterans Affairs



Board of Trustees Annual Report for 2020

Patrick Nelligan
Board Chairperson

Dawn Works-Dennis
Board Vice-Chairperson

Thomas J. Saadi
Commissioner

May 6, 2021



“Serving Those Who Served”



May 6, 2021

Dear Governor Lamont and Members of the Veterans Affairs Committee:

I am pleased to submit this report on behalf of the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) Board of Trustees in accordance with C.G.S. §27-102n(i). The DVA Board of Trustees (Board) continues working hard to serve Connecticut's Veterans through the oversight of and collaboration with the DVA along with local, state and federal agencies, Veteran Service Organizations, community partners and volunteers to ensure the delivery of Veterans programs and benefits in accordance with state and federal law and best practices in a sustainable manner.

The Board operates pursuant to C.G.S. §27-102n, which requires that the DVA provide comprehensive quarterly reports to the Board on more than a dozen areas of DVA operations. In addition to providing these quarterly reports the DVA also provides all Veteran Residents with a semi-annual report on the revenue and expenditures of the DVA Institutional General Welfare Fund and the opportunities to submit suggestions for the use of the IGW.

The Board fulfilled its duties during 2020 despite the pandemic through active engagement in the oversight of both operational issues and policy updates at the DVA with regular virtual Board meetings and briefings by DVA Commissioner Thomas J. Saadi and DVA Staff as well as the work of multiple ad hoc subcommittees. The Board worked closely with Commissioner Saadi who was on Active Military duty for a portion of the year, to ensure continuity of operations throughout the pandemic. This included ongoing upgrades to the DVA fire alarm and sprinkler systems, American with Disabilities Act upgrades in the Residential Facility and expansion of the Residential Semi-Private Living Program. Commissioner Saadi and the DVA staff implemented COVID-19 mitigation measures early in the pandemic minimizing negative health impacts on DVA Veterans and staff in light of the tragic deaths of hundreds of Veterans in State homes throughout the region.

The strong collaboration between the Board and Commissioner Saadi in the DVA's response to the COVID-19 pandemic included regular conference calls and written updates by the Commissioner to Board members and the rapid response to questions and concerns by Board members with full transparency on DVA COVID-19 mitigation efforts.

This report is delayed in submission due to the resignation of former Chairperson Michael Thomas and the time needed for a successor to be appointed by the Governor.

Respectfully Submitted,

Patrick Nelligan
Chairperson
Veteran, United States Army

Dawn W. Dennis

Dawn Works-Dennis
Vice-Chairperson
Veteran, United States Army

DVA Board of Trustees Annual Report for 2020¹

Introduction

This report is submitted in accordance with C.G.S. §27-102n(i), which requires, in pertinent part, that the DVA Board of Trustees (Board) report on the progress in fulfilling its mission based on programmatic outcomes and provide recommendations, if any, for improving the delivery of services to veterans and the addition of new programs. The Board's statutory mission is to review and comment on the DVA Budget and major policy and programmatic changes and to review agency regulations prior to adoption by the Commissioner relating to:

- a. Admission and discharge or transfer of Veterans.
- b. Fee schedule for programs, services and benefits.
- c. Participation of eligible family members in programs or services.

Throughout 2020 the Board has fulfilled its statutory mission through active engagement with the DVA leadership and oversight of DVA operations, policies and programs. This highly collaborative process is consistent with Commissioner Thomas J. Saadi's leadership philosophy of empowering the Board through transparency and bilateral engagement with the Board related to the full spectrum of DVA programs and operations. This was underscored by the regular communication by Commissioner Saadi and DVA staff with the Board and DVA stakeholders regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the DVA and its effective response thereto.

At the Board's regular quarterly meetings, held virtually, Commissioner Saadi and DVA Senior Staff provided comprehensive and detailed PowerPoint briefing updates regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, agency budget, staffing, facilities, projects, legislation and policies along with proposals for expanded and additional programs as well as existing and anticipated challenges, fiscal and operational, impacting the DVA and Veterans programs across the State.

In addition to the briefings provided at each DVA Board meeting, the DVA provided quarterly written reports to the Board with information necessary for the Board to fulfill its mission. These reports included, among other things, program and policy updates, data and performance measures in the following areas:

- (1) Budget revenues and expenditures.
- (2) Staffing levels.
- (3) Facilities and fleet management.
- (4) Current and planned projects.
- (5) Residential Facility and Patriot's Landing Family Housing applications for admission including number of Veterans admitted, reasons for denials or withdrawals of applications for admission and overall monthly occupancy rates in residential programs.
- (6) Summary of voluntary and involuntary discharges from Veterans from the Residential Program and reasons for discharge (e.g. community based transitional housing, independent living, disciplinary actions, etc . . .)

¹ For reasons explained in cover letter this report is delayed in submission and, as such, includes information and data through March of 2021.

- (7) Summaries of Healthcare Center patient census, clinical services and any incident rates.
- (8) Summary of programs overseen by the Office of Advocacy and Assistance and caseload figures for veterans' service officers.
- (9) Cemetery and Memorial services including burial statistics.
- (10) Results of any federal and/or state inspections.
- (11) Summaries by type, frequency and resolution, of concerns raised by Veteran Residents of the petitions and complaints filed by Veteran Residents and relatives or authorized representatives of such Veteran Residents.
- (12) Additional reports which have included updates on the Bed Bug eradication program, results of client surveys, and the status of transitioning the Healthcare Center to a Skilled Nursing license.

In providing this information the DVA explained the impact of the pandemic on each reporting area particularly as it related to the Residential and Skilled Nursing Programs. The DVA leadership and staff consistently exhibited openness and transparency which contributes greatly to the ability of the Board to effectively perform its statutory mission.

Organizationally, this report summarizes the Board's activities and provides recommendations for each of the DVA's four core functions, addresses whether the DVA implemented previous recommendations and concludes with general recommendations for the DVA overall.

Board Activities and Recommendations for DVA Core Functions

I. Residential Programs and Services

a. Board activities

The Board has been actively engaged in many major program and policy updates implemented during 2020 including the Residential Program. These include support for the rapid expansion of the Semi-Private Living Program which the Board assisted in developing in 2019. The Board reviewed the Residential Program Fee policy of payment of 30% of adjusted income after four months of residency and recommended no changes until a majority of Residential Facility Wings are converted to the Semi-Private Living Program.

In 2020 Board members were actively involved with DVA Stand Down, an annual event led by the Residential Program normally held only at the DVA Rocky Hill Campus with over 100 Federal, State and local agencies and social service organizations providing assistance to more than 1000 Veterans. While the COVID-19 pandemic changed the way agencies and organizations operated, the DVA continued its commitment to serving Connecticut's Veterans by providing a hybrid Stand Down 2020 with "one stop" access to a range of programs and services offered by State and Federal agencies, Veterans Organizations and Community Based Non-profits.

Stand Down 2020 took place over two days with the first day being online informational sessions and webinars conducted by the DVA and other agencies and community service providers on topics including supportive services for Veterans and their families, Federal VA Benefits, housing and homeless services, state labor/employment and vocational resources, Veteran caregiver support, legal aid and assistance and many more. The second day the DVA coordinated distribution of personal need items to Veterans by Veteran Service Organizations and community-based non-profits at the DVA Rocky Hill Campus and in Danbury, Bridgeport and Norwich. These locations were staffed by DVA volunteers and representatives of the regional Vet Centers, the CT Bar Association. Benefits information, pro-bono legal services, flu vaccines and free COVID-19 testing were also provided.

This new approach, the first regional based Stand Down held by the DVA in decades, was a great success connecting hundreds of Veterans across the State with programs, benefits and services in the midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

b. Implementation of Prior Recommendations:

There were four major recommendations of the Board in its report issued in 2020 and the DVA has successfully achieved each as follows:

1. **Board Recommendation:** While the DVA did operate a temporary COVID-19 Isolation and Recovery Unit (IRU) within the Residential Facility, the Board recommended the establishment of a long-term IRU in a currently unoccupied residential wing. This will allow for the temporary wing to transition to Semi-Private Living as was planned prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Implementing this recommendation will, as has been discussed between the Board and Commissioner Saadi, allow the DVA to maintain the regular

admission process during a future pandemic and will also assist in mitigating the spread of infectious disease with fewer Veterans in shared living spaces.

DVA Action: The DVA did establish a long-term COVID-19 Isolation and recovery Unit in A-wing of the residential facility through the use of COVID-19 relief funds to renovate the wing. The IRU includes a section for COVID-19 positive Veterans in negative pressure rooms along with a separate section for quarantining Veterans and an updated day room for Veterans in the IRU. As a result of these updates, the DVA was able to complete transition of the temporary IRU to a Semi-Private Living Wing as well as maintain regular admissions throughout the majority of the pandemic.

2. **Board Recommendation** Continue to Expand the Semi-Private Living Program within the Residential Facility.

DVA Action: The DVA has continued the expansion of the Semi-Private Living Program with two more Residential Facility Wings (D-wing and H-wing) renovated during the Pandemic.

3. **Board Recommendation:** Enhance engagement with Veteran Residents who are struggling with their Individual Treatment Programs and active intervention with Veteran Residents who are failing in the performance of the required Activities of Daily Living (ADLs) and require a higher level of care not available within the Residential program. Such an approach is in the best interest of Veterans as the goal of the DVA is to help move Veterans to a better quality and more productive life through supportive programs and services that match the physical and mental health needs of the Veteran.

DVA Action: The DVA has increased direct engagement (virtual and in person) with Veteran Residents as part of the Individual Treatment Plan (ITP) review process to, among other things, conduct assessments regarding level of care needed to facilitate a better quality of life. As a result, some Veterans have transitioned to the DVA Healthcare Center, others have required intensive in-patient treatment and others have responded well to the supportive wrap around services offered within the Residential Program.

c. **Recommendations:**

1. Continue the expansion of the Semi-Private Living Program throughout the entire Residential Facility.
2. Apply funds from Quality of Life/Facilities donation fund for upgrades and updates to the Residential Facility, including but not limited to, painting, restoration of Veteran artwork and other quality of life related improvements.
3. Commensurate with the expansion of the Semi-Private Living Program which includes Veterans participating in the basic upkeep and maintenance of their respective Residential Wings and Common areas, consider a reduction in the monthly program fee.
4. Develop an enhanced marketing plan to provide information about the HCC to Veterans across the state. This may include regular email communications, social media campaigns, traditional media interview and possible print and electronic advertising.

II. Healthcare Center

a. Board Activities

The Board was actively engaged throughout 2019, in the process of the DVA transitioning the Sgt, John Levitow Healthcare Center (HCC) from a chronic disease hospital to a state licensed and Center for Medicaid & Medicare Systems (CMS) certified long-term care skilled nursing facility. The Board conducted oversight of this transition process through DVA quarterly reports, Board meetings and conference calls as well as multiple site visits by Board members who provided helpful guidance to the DVA. The Board members advocated for maintaining the additional clinical and operational services at the DVA Campus, not traditionally associated with a community based skilled nursing facility, such as an onsite pharmacy, onsite physician services and in the Residential Facility, an outpatient clinic.

This highly involved and lengthy process involved the complete restructuring of HCC staffing, the rewriting of nearly all HCC policies and procedures as well as many physical upgrades and repairs to the HCC. This transition better addresses the needs of existing Veteran Patients, provides a continuum of care to Residential Veterans who are no longer able to care for themselves and better serves the needs of a large number of Veterans across our State in the provision of long-term clinical care.

b. Implementation of Prior Recommendations:

There were three major recommendations of the Board in its report issued in 2020 and the DVA has successfully achieved each as follows:

1. **Board Recommendation:** While the DVA established a COVID-19 Isolation Recovery Unit in the HCC, it is not operationally practical to restrict use of an entire medical wing in that manner. Therefore, the DVA should consider physical upgrades or use of new equipment to establish negative pressure rooms for use in the future to address the care of COVID-19 positive patients.

DVA Action: The DVA did establish a long-term COVID-19 Isolation and recovery Unit in a portion of a wing within the HCC with the use of COVID-19 relief funds to set up negative pressure rooms. As a result, the DVA was able to maintain regular admissions throughout the majority of the pandemic.

2. **Board Recommendation:** The DVA should have procedures in place and make facility improvements to avoid the suspending of HCC admissions during future health emergencies (including a COVID-19 resurgence in Connecticut) as it is often those most in need of the healthcare services that the DVA provides who are disproportionately negatively impacted during a health emergency.

DVA Action: In addition to its general COVID-19 Mitigation Protocols, the DVA established a robust COVID-19 testing and vaccination regime which helped to create a safe and healthy environment within the HCC which contributed to the HCC being able to maintain regular admissions throughout the majority of the pandemic.

3. **Board Recommendation:** The DVA should initiate the phasing out of Veteran Patients smoking, consistent with best practices, which will enhance the health of Veteran Patients and of DVA staff who are required to escort Veteran Patients while they are smoking. This may be a gradual process by which current Veteran Patients are provided smoking cessation support and new admissions are not permitted to smoke.

DVA Action: The DVA HCC has worked to reduce smoking by its Veteran Patients through education, cessation programs and reducing the number of smoking times permitted at the HCC. This has resulted in a dramatic reduction in smoking by Veteran Patients.

c. Recommendations

1. Develop a marketing plan to provide information about the HCC to Veterans and Veterans supporters across the state which may include regular email communications, social media campaigns, traditional media interview and possible printed and electronic advertising with the goal of HCC at 90% of capacity by July 1, 2022.
2. As reported by the Commissioner the HCC is having difficulty with both Community based and Residential Program Veterans navigating the process of apply for and being approved for Medicaid. As the DVA Social workers and Fiscal staff do not have the resources to provide ongoing direct assistance to Veterans throughout the Medicaid application process the DVA should consider contracting with a consultant to assist Veterans with the Medicaid process on an as needed basis. Such an approach may be necessary in the short term once the HCC has increased its census.
3. Continue the phasing out of smoking by Veteran Patients with a goal of making the HCC smoke free by July 1, 2022.

III. Office of Advocacy and Assistance

a. Board activities

The Office of Advocacy and Assistance (OA&A) employs Veteran Service Officers (VSO), all combat deployment Veterans, who provide representation to Veterans and eligible dependents in their claims for Federal pensions and benefits. OA&A is also responsible for determining eligibility for the Veteran flag on the state driver's license or identification card, certifying Veteran Owned Micro Businesses for state contract bidding, administering the Municipal Veterans Representative Program, validating Veterans as eligible for pretrial diversionary programs and for determining eligibility for the issuance of the CT Wartime Service Medal. The Board's activities related to OA&A in 2020 focused on outreach to Veterans and Veteran Service Organizations across the State as the pandemic significantly impacted O&A's ability to connect with Veterans across the State until robust virtual solutions were implemented in the latter part of 2020. Despite the outreach limitations due to the pandemic, OA&A VSOs continued active representation and advocacy for Veterans and eligible dependents via phone, email and virtual meetings.

b. Implementation of Prior Recommendations:

There was one major recommendation of the Board in its report issued in 2020 which the DVA has addressed as follows:

1. **Board Recommendation:** OA&A will need to develop new methods to conduct outreach in a COVID-19 environment taking into consideration that many of its potential clients are not regular users of web based virtual means of communication. This may include traditional mailings either by the DVA to target constituencies, regular outreach to community partners asking them to disseminate information to their networks, working with state and federal agencies to make OA&A services information available to points of client services.

DVA Action: OA&A has adapted to working in a virtual environment which includes new ways of conducting outreach to the Veterans community such as mass distribution emails with benefits updates. OA&A also holds monthly virtual Veteran Town Halls on a Teams platform with each Town Hall session covering a different aspect of Veteran Programs, Benefits and Services at the Federal, State and Local level. DVA has continually updated its website to provide an increasing amount of information in a user-friendly format to help facilitate connecting Veterans with many available programs and services.

c. Recommendations

1. As pandemic restrictions lift, OA&A should maintain virtual outreach while gradually increasing in person outreach which should include identifying Veterans events, community activities, organizations and entities where VSO's can connect with Veterans and Veteran supporters. While the outreach should focus on the OA&A mission of representation of Veterans and eligible dependents in obtaining Federal benefits and service, VSO's should regularly distribute in person and through both email and regular mail, DVA's core function brochures for the Healthcare Center, Residential Program and Cemetery and Memorial Services.

IV. Cemetery and Memorial Services

a. Board activities

OA&A is responsible for overseeing DVA Cemetery and Memorial Services which administers three state Veterans' cemeteries. The first, and oldest, is located in Darien and closed to new burials in 1980 when reaching capacity; the second is the Colonel Gates Cemetery located in Rocky Hill which is reserved for Veteran Residents and Veteran Patients of the DVA (the DVA receives no federal funds for this cemetery); and the third is the federally recognized State Veterans Cemetery in Middletown for which the DVA receives federal funding for capital improvements.

In 2019 the Board Chairperson appointed a sub-committee on Cemetery issues which has been actively engaged with DVA throughout 2020 in developing solutions which addressed concerns relating to sustaining maintenance and upkeep of the Cemetery and the need to increase long-term burial/internment capacity at the Cemetery. These and other issues were identified in the Veterans Cemetery Master Plan report commissioned by the DVA and issued in February 2019. Among the recommendations were options for property acquisition to address the increase in annual burial

rates over the past ten years which have resulted in the projection of the Cemetery reaching internment capacity in approximately seven to nine years. Also included in the Cemetery Master Plan report and in best practices guidance by the National Cemetery Administration, were recommendations for the consolidation of Cemetery and Memorial administrative and grounds staff at the Cemetery, construction of additional administrative and operational buildings including a committal shelter, secure equipment storage areas and a breakroom for Cemetery staff.

The Board was updated regularly on completion of two major capital projects at the Cemetery with the first being the addition of 2000 preplaced burial vaults and extensive drainage and irrigation upgrades in an area of the Cemetery previously deemed unusable. The second is the Appearance and landscaping project which resulted in the cleaning and realignment of more than 10,000 headstones and the re-sodding and paving of much of the Cemetery. Both of which were completed during the pandemic.

b. Implementation of Prior Recommendations:

There were two major recommendations of the Board in its report issued in 2019 which the DVA has addressed as follows:

1. **Board Recommendation:** The DVA should continue with a planned consolidation of Cemetery and Memorial Services staff and Cemetery operational and grounds staff at the State Veterans Cemetery. As part of this consolidation, the DVA should expeditiously secure additional property for administrative offices and secure storage of equipment from the CT Valley Hospital (CVH) which can be accomplished without the need for property acquisition funding.

DVA Action: The DVA was able to acquire, at no cost, additional land and a building known as “Cottage 22” from CVH which is being utilized for the secure storage of equipment. Cottage 22 does require moderate repairs and upgrades before it can be used as office space however, the OA&A Manager is proceeding a Cemetery personnel consolidation plan approved by Commissioner Saadi which will place Cemetery and Memorial Services staff in temporary offices in the Cemetery Administrative building. This will allow for Veterans and family members to meet with Cemetery and Memorial services staff on location eliminating the need for Veterans and family members to travel between the DVA Rocky Hill campus and the Cemetery.

2. **Board Recommendation:** The State Veterans Cemetery in Middletown will reach burial capacity within ten years. Therefore, the DVA must immediately initiate the process of securing additional land for either the expansion of the Veterans Cemetery in Middletown or for a new State Veterans Cemetery. The recommended course of action is the acquisition of land adjacent to the existing cemetery which will avoid the need for staff to maintain an additional cemetery. Acquisition of the land for the Middletown Cemetery will require a financial commitment from the state as federal Cemetery Administration funding is not available for the purchase of land to expand the cemetery.

DVA Action: In 2020 Commissioner Saadi initiated through the Department of Administrative Service’s (DAS) Property Leasing and Transfer Division the process for Veteran Cemetery property acquisition. This process has focused on three parcels of land identified in the DVA Cemetery Master Plan of 2019. The largest parcel, and the only one

contiguous to the Veterans Cemetery, is a 13.65 acre lot owned by St. Mary's Parish of Middletown, the second parcel is a 5.95 acre lot owned by CT Valley Hospital (CVH) and the third parcel is an 8.95 acre lot privately owned with the latter two parcels located across the street from the current Veterans Cemetery. The DVA made an offer of \$350,000 to purchase the St. Mary's parcel which was rejected by the Parish which wants \$1.1 million for this landlocked property. DAS contacted the Parish property broker to request reconsideration and/or for the Parish to make counteroffer. The Parish rejected further discussions absent DVA increasing the offer. The CVH parcel is not available due to ongoing litigation. As such, the DVA has terminated discussions with the Parish and is proceeding with identifying other continuous CVH property that may be suitable and also reaching out to the owner of the third parcel to determine whether there is an interest in selling the land. Commissioner Saadi and DAS continue working diligently to secure Cemetery expansion property in advance of the current Veterans Cemetery reaching burial capacity

3. **Board Recommendation:** The DVA should develop non-appropriated funding sources to support the perpetual care and maintenance of the State Veterans Cemetery which may include providing the opportunity for individual donations and fundraising by the Board through the Wreaths Across America program.

DVA Action: The DVA established a special donation fund within its Institutional General Welfare (IGW) Fund to support the perpetual care and maintenance of the Veterans Cemetery. To date the fund has received approximately \$78,000 in donations which are being applied judiciously to supplement appropriated funds to ensure proper upkeep of the cemetery.

With regard to Wreath Across America program at the Veterans Cemetery, this was a program predominately operated by the Civil Air Patrol (CAP) Royal Composite Wing as a fundraiser for CAP raising tens of thousands of dollars for CAP's internal operations, equipment and community program expenses. The current Board and DVA administration were unaware of the fundraising element, which had been taking place for a few years, until mid-2019, and upon learning of it both the Board and then the Commissioner raised concerns with CAP explaining that unless a portion of the funds were provided to the DVA for the purpose of perpetual care and maintenance of the Veterans Cemetery no such fundraising should take place. The Board and the Commissioner did not believe that it was appropriate to use an event at the Veterans Cemetery to raise money unless those dollars were applied to the expenses of maintaining the Veterans Cemetery. However, CAP could not, within its operational regulations/charter, donate funds from the Wreath Across America fundraiser to the DVA. Instead, with the full cooperation of Senior Leadership of CAP in CT, the Wreaths Across America program was altered to sell the wreaths at cost avoiding the issue of raising money for a third party organization through an event at the Veterans Cemetery.

c. **Recommendations**

1. The DVA should continue actively searching for abutting property (public and private) for expansion of the Veterans Cemetery.

2. There should be no fundraising events of any nature held at the Veterans Cemetery unless the proceeds are to be applied to the maintenance and care of the Veterans Cemetery.
3. The DVA should initiate the planning process for the establishing of an outdoor committal shelter at the Veterans Cemetery.

V. COVID-19 Mitigation Efforts

The DVA implemented early and effective COVID-19 Mitigation Protocols across the agency's Core Function areas to mitigate the risk of exposure and spread of the virus to and among Veteran Patients, Residents and staff. Commissioner Saadi provided briefings to the full Board, which maintained a regular meeting schedule via virtual meeting platforms. Additionally, Commissioner Saadi held regular weekly calls with the Board Chair and Vice-Chair reporting on DVA's COVID-19 status and regular operations.

Since the first week of March 2020, the DVA has maintained a proactive approach to mitigating the risk of exposure to and transmission of COVID-19 through a broad range of COVID-19 mitigation protocols. These included restrictions on visitors to the DVA Campus, restrictions on travel by Veteran Residents and Patients, establishing COVID-19 Isolation Recovery Units in the Residential Facility and Healthcare Center, conducting daily health screenings of Veterans and staff and frequent point prevalence COVID testing of all Veteran Residents, Veteran Patients and Staff. Throughout the pandemic, the DVA has maintained a robust supply of personal protective equipment (PPE) for staff and Veterans and continues to do so in order to handle a COVID-19 surge. The DVA worked closely with the Federal VA Healthcare System in CT to increase the DVA's COVID-19 testing capacity, share best practices and coordinate the delivery of medical care to DVA Veterans which included increased access to telehealth services.

The DVA began vaccinating Veteran Patients, Residents and frontline Staff in December 2020 and as of the date of this report ninety-eight percent of Veterans and sixty percent of staff are vaccinated against the COVID-19 virus. To date the DVA has tested two hundred and forty-five Veteran Residents and Patients (most multiple times) for COVID-19 with seventy testing positive or retesting positive since March 2020. Of those testing positive, sixty-five recovered from the virus. One Veteran Resident and two Veteran Patients passed away in the spring due to COVID-19, and two Veteran Patients passed away in December and January from COVID-19 complications. One Veteran Patient with COVID-19 passed away in December from a non-COVID-19 medical occurrence. Of the sixty-one DVA staff members testing positive for COVID-19 since the beginning of the pandemic, sixty staff members have recovered and returned to work and two remain in various stages of recovery and will be cleared to return to work consistent with CDC and DPH guidelines.

The Board commends the leadership and staff at the DVA for making the health and safety of our Veterans their first priority and carrying out that priority with great success resulting in a COVID-19 infection, hospitalization and death rate far lower than many other congregant living and skilled nursing facilities for Veterans across the Northeast region.

VI. General Recommendations

In addition to the specific core function recommendations above, the Board previously made two general recommendations as follows:

1. **Board Recommendation:** The Board recommended stable funding for the DVA and urged members of the General Assembly to exercise restraint when considering adoption of unfunded mandates for new programs, services or reporting requirements for the DVA.

Action: We are pleased that the Governor's proposed bi-annual budget for FY22 and FY23 contain no cuts in DVA funding which had suffered a series of reductions over the past decade which if continued, would have compromised the DVA's capacity to provide quality services to our State's Veterans.

2. **Board Recommendation:** The DVA should continue to enhance its programs and services through partnerships, especially with community-based non-profits, using the successful partnership with Easterseals Rally Point as a model. This can be accomplished by providing low cost operational space on Campus in exchange for the provision of care and support to DVA Veterans and community-based Veterans thereby enhancing programs and services without additional costs to the State.

DVA Action: The DVA's ability to effectuate such new partnerships operating on Campus was severely restricted by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, during that time the DVA entered into a new lease and MOU with the American Legion Auxiliary bringing its programs and services to the newly renovated building 50 which houses other Veteran Service Organizations and is intended to be a hub for such programs in the future.

General Recommendations

1. The DVA Auditorium is a historic venue and while its use was very limited prior to 2020, throughout the pandemic it supported events requiring social distancing including Veteran recreational activities, DVA Staff meetings, DVA Ceremonies, Stand Down activities, COVID-19 testing and COVID-19 vaccine clinics. The DVA auditorium is a very functional space which requires some basic repairs and maintenance to improve the experience for the Veterans and Staff using the venue. We recommend that the DVA apply Quality of Life/Facilities donation funds to update and upgrade the DVA Auditorium with a focus on making it an ADA compliant versatile and operational space for recreational and other activities for Veterans. These improvements should include removing fixed outdated and unsafe seating, repairing damaged flooring, painting, replacing old curtains and other unsafe materials and installing improved lighting.

2. In the aftermath of Storm Isaias the DVA was without utility power for nearly a week relying on generators for all power on Campus. The DVA has two generators, one for the HCC installed during construction with a 300 Kilowatt capacity and a 1000 kilowatt generator which provides power to the remainder of the Campus. While the 1000 kilowatt generator operated well, the 300 kilowatt generator was insufficient to power the HCC air-conditioning system requiring the DVA to request an emergency 700 Kilowatt generator from Eversource which was provided at no cost to keep the HCC full powered. We

recommend that the DVA replace the HCC generator with a system that is able to fully power all systems in the HCC during a utility outage.

3. The DVA should conduct a review of current energy use and distribution with a focus on implementing energy efficient long-term cost saving solutions for lighting, heating and cooling of buildings across the Campus.

4. The DVA should consider new partnerships with community based non-profit housing providers to lease vacant DVA buildings for the provision of long-term Veteran housing on the DVA Campus.

VII. Board Minutes

Attached hereto are the minutes from each Board's meeting during 2020 and the first quarter of 2021, which demonstrate the activities of the Board in carrying out its mission and the transparency of the DVA in providing the Board with detailed information regarding operations, programs and services.

Department of Veterans Affairs
Board of Trustees - Meeting Minutes

January 3, 2020

March 27, 2020

June 11, 2020

August 26, 2020

September 2, 2020

December 2, 2020

March 10, 2021



**Department of Veterans Affairs
State of Connecticut**

**Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes
January 3, 2020**
(Minutes subject to review at next Board Meeting)

I. Convene Meeting:

The Meeting was called to order by Chair Michael Thomas at 3:00 PM in the DVA Commissioner's conference room.

Pledge of allegiance was led by Heather Sandler followed by the taking of attendance of Board members.

In attendance: Paul Barry, Philip Cacciola, Juan Cruz, Richard Dziekan, Peter Galgano, Steven Harris, Alyssa Kelleher, Frederick Leaf, Sharad Samy, Heather Sandler, Mark Spranzo, Michael Thomas, Kjell Tollefsen, Sherri Vogt and Dawn Works-Dennis.

Absent: John Banks, Richard Benson, and Patrick Nelligan.

In attendance from the DVA: Commissioner Thomas Saadi, Shumei Chu, Joseph Danao, Darlene Deschaine, Tammy Marzik, Ryan McKenna, Laura Nelson, and Jane Siegel.

Commissioner Saadi, who took a day of military leave to work at the DVA, introduced the DVA's new staff attorney Jane Siegel, a military spouse, who then administered the oath of office to newly appointed Trustee, Sharad Samy.

Chair Thomas entertained a motion to approve the minutes of the previous meeting. Motion made by Trustee Dziekan and seconded by Trustee Kelleher. Motion passed unanimously without any corrections or edits to the minutes.

Commissioner's Achievements & Events: The Commissioner spoke briefly about the events that took place on campus which included hosting the VA Committee Co-Chairs Rep. Borer and Sen. Maroney at the campus, volunteers from Eversource provided a Day of Caring by doing fall clean up and landscaping on campus as well as in Colonel Gates cemetery. Commissioner Saadi was part of a delegation to West Point, and presented a Wartime Service Medal to WWII Veteran and longtime State Representative, John Mordasky. In September a ribbon cutting event for Easter Seals Rally Point took place on campus which included Lt. Governor Byseiwicz and several members of the Legislature. In October four unclaimed cremated Veterans remains were buried in the Middletown State Veterans Cemetery with full honors. October 5th DVA hosted the 1st Annual Women Veteran Health & Wellness brunch attended by more

than 60 women veterans with providers such as dieticians, mindfulness activities and veteran benefit information. In November the DVA hosted the Annual AT&T 3 Miler event with proceeds totaling \$4,000. On December 6th the DVA conducted the CT Veterans Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony at the LOB with 10 inductees receiving this honor including Board of Trustees Vice-Chair Pat Nelligan. December 12th was the Annual Holiday Extravaganza on campus. The upcoming events include a Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Ceremony at the State Capitol, Yard Goats Military Appreciation Game, the Annual Stand Down, the Annual AT&T 3 Miler and Veteran's Day Events.

II. Old Business

A. Licensure Transition

Commissioner Saadi asked Healthcare Center Director Laura Nelson to update the board on the HCC License Transition. She explained that the DVA has completed all steps in the transition of the Healthcare Center (HCC) from a Chronic Disease Hospital (CDH) license to a Skilled Nursing Facility (SNF) and is awaiting final inspection and certification by the Centers of Medicare Medicaid Services (CMS). Director Nelson stated that the HCC is ready for the inspection. Commissioner added that the Veterans Outpatient Clinic has been operating well on a five-day schedule for the previous three months.

B. Budget & Staffing Trends:

Shu Mei Chu from DVA's Fiscal Office gave an update on the budget and staffing trends. She explained that the DVA's Operating Costs are tight but on budget and the DVA is on target with a balanced budget that includes IGW contributions toward agency programs for Veterans. Ms. Chu added that the DVA has a small quarterly deficiency which will be addressed in the next quarter.

Trustee Barry asked if the \$60,000 increase for headstones is going towards the installation of the headstones. After some indecisive discussion Commissioner Saadi said he would get clarification off line.

C. Projects Update

Projects and Operations Director Joe Danao provided a general DVA Projects update which included the near completion of the Middletown State Veteran Cemetery Expansion project and the Cemetery Appearance project projected for completion in Spring 2020.

The Cemetery Services Master Plan is complete and moving forward is important to address the space issue at the Cemetery. In response to Chair Thomas' question as to how much time before the cemetery will be full, Director Danao answered approximately ten years. However, the agency will have to watch and closely monitor this matter as Connecticut has the fourth highest veteran population over 60 years old in the nation. Trustee Barry stated that he and other members of the Board are concerned with how long the procurement process for land can take and that the DVA needs to be more proactive. Commissioner Saadi explained that he began the process several months ago of opening discussions to secure one or both pieces of property adjacent the cemetery. The first is owned by Calvary Cemetery (St. Mary's Parish) and the other by CT Valley Hospital CVH). He added that unfortunately the Parish is asking \$1.3 million for the property which he states is excessive. The Commissioner asked to speak directly with the parish priest and the council members, however, that request was denied and he was

referred to the Parish real-estate broker. Commissioner Saadi contacted Lt. Governor's office and she is supporting DVA efforts. CVH is willing to discuss a land transfer however, there is a leaking water main under the property at issue so the transfer cannot occur until that is fixed. There are no capitol funds at this time to fix the water main. The third piece of property is privately owned and DVA has not yet contacted the owners. Commissioner stated that the DVA will keep the multiple options open for consideration.

Trustee Barry asked to put a motion forward to adopt the Cemetery Master Plan to give it more political teeth, the motion was unanimously adopted by the Board.

Director Danao also updated the Trustees on the Rocky Hill Campus renovations stating that the Abatement Projects are complete, including replacement of Boiler #4 and the walls in Building 5. The Fire Alarm and Suppression System is at the punch-list phase and the ADA Upgrades for Buildings 2, 3 and 4 are awaiting construction contract awards. He reported that D-Wing upgrades have been directed by Commissioner Saadi with a completion date of May of 2020.

Director Danao reported that DVA Bond Allocation Requests underscoring the need for the \$465,000 Bond request for minor capital repairs, which includes paving, removal/replace indoor transformers, fire system repairs, road repairs/study, and emergency repair funding. Other working projects include building 50 renovations, digital transformation known as the DVA "Pen/Pencil to Keyboard" project and the Cemetery Services Compliance Audit.

D. Wreaths Across America Update

Chair Thomas reported on the Wreaths Across America event that was held on December 14, 2019, stating that with the assistance of DVA staff and volunteers the event went very well. He highlighted the work of OAA Director Ryan McKenna and Chief Stephen Scatena in reorganizing traffic flow, parking and staging which contributed to the success of the event. An after action review will be held soon to close out last year's event and he will report back to the Board. There will be an ad hoc group from the Board to move forward with the Wreaths Across America project in some form.

E. Transportation Task Force

Commissioner Saadi asked for input from the Board members as to Veterans' transportation concerns to submit to the Transportation Task Force. Commissioner Saadi recommended members send their input to Chair Thomas to aggregate the information and forward to the Commissioner to present to the Task Force. Deadline for these recommendations has not been set, however, the Task Force is taking recommendations not later than the end of January 2020. Chair Thomas went on to address the Board and state that he would like to have these recommendations sent to him no later than January 17th.

Chair Thomas asked if there were any other questions to address before going onto new business. Trustee Spranzo was concerned about the lack of activity regarding the issues being addressed after the Commissioner's walk through. The Commissioner went on to explain to the Board that he conducted a personal walkthrough of the campus and drafted six reports setting forth concerns and issues with the buildings and grounds with recommended responses/remediation efforts. The Commissioner has been sending out the reports to senior DVA staff. To expedite these tasks a new electronic work order ticket system was implemented. The Commissioner will continue to follow up on this matter.

III. New Business

A. Semi-Private Living Program:

Commissioner Saadi reported that the Semi-Private Living Program (SPLP) has been operating well in Residential C-Wing and B-Wing with 5 double occupancy semi-private updated rooms. In addition to updated accommodations the SPLP promotes team work among Veteran Residents who are responsible for basic maintenance and upkeep of the wing. This helps build capacity to accomplish goals and promote a greater level of independence in support of Veterans securing community based educational, employment and housing opportunities. The Commissioner reported that he has directed the expansion of the program to another wing of the Residential Facility (D-Wing) in the spring of 2020.

B. Building 50 Reoccupation:

Building 50 (formerly known as "Fellowship House") has been under renovation by the DVA and in the next few weeks tenant organizations and some DVA operations will relocate to Building 50. The consolidation of Veteran Service organizations, no-profit providers and DVA services into this updated facility is a big step forward in creating an improved environment for our Veterans and those proving the programs and services.

C. Chairman Report:

Chair Thomas spoke of the Wreaths Across America issue, stating that it comes down to money and that one particular unit of the Civil Air Patrol (CAP) has been making a large profits over the years by utilizing the Veterans Cemetery in Middletown. The Board has been concerned that CAP is overly reliant on the WAA program and offers nothing to DVA for Cemetery upkeep. Chair Thomas is in discussion with CAP, which are complex and Chair Thomas will keep the Board updated.

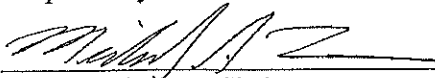
Commissioner Saadi reported that during his quasi-leave of absence for six months of Active Military Duty he has been keeping in touch with senior through frequent conference calls, as well as holding calls with Board leadership, legislators and others related to DVA operations. He is also using military leave days to work at the DVA at least one day every two weeks. The Commissioner then had Director Danao distribute the updated five-year facilities capitalization plan to Board members.

Chair Thomas surveyed feasible dates with the Board and set the next Board meeting for Friday, March 27, 3:00 pm. Chair Thomas asked the Board to consider meeting every two months instead of quarterly. He will take a poll of the members and report back in March.

IV. Closing

There being no further business, Chair Thomas entertained a motion to adjourn. Motion was made and passed unanimously at 4:29 PM.

Respectfully Submitted:



Michael Thomas, Chair
DVA Board of Trustees

Date 1/25/2020



**Department of Veterans Affairs
State of Connecticut**

**Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes
March 27, 2020**

(Minutes subject to review at next Board Meeting)

I. Convene Meeting:

The Meeting (conducted via Teleconference) was called to order by Chairman Thomas at 3:00 PM.

In attendance were Trustees: John Banks, Paul Barry, Richard Benson, Juan Cruz, Peter Galgano, Steven Harris, Alyssa Kelleher, Frederick Leaf, Sharad Samy, Heather Sandler, Mark Spranzo, Michael Thomas, Sherri Vogt and Dawn Works-Dennis.

Absent Trustes: Phil Cacciola, Richard Dziekan, Patrick Nelligan and Kjell Tollefsen.

In attendance from the DVA: Commissioner Thomas Saadi, Darlene Deschaine, Tammy Marzik, and Leslie Nieves.

Chairman Thomas entertained a motion to approve the minutes of the previous meeting. Motion made by Trustee Leaf and seconded by Trustee Galgano. Motion passed with one abstain from Trustee Benson who requested another copy of January 3rd minutes sent to him. No other corrections or edits to the minutes.

Chairman Thomas stated that this meeting would focus on the DVA response to the COVID-19 health emergency including updates on policies, protocols and procedures to protect the health, safety and welfare of the Veteran Residents, Veterans Patients and DVA Staff. One exception would be to address Trustee Benson's request to discuss the Cemetery Master Plan. Trustee Benson withdrew that request and stated he would approach the issue at a later date. Chairman Thomas then asked Commissioner Thomas Saadi to provide a COVID-19 update.

Commissioner Saadi explained that he remains on active military duty in NY and is subject to DoD travel restrictions, however he is in daily contact with DVA managers and staff, including on weekends, and DVA senior managers and he are on the daily Governor's Unified Command calls and tele-meetings with state and federal agencies to ensure safe and continuous DVA operations.

Commissioner Saadi reported that the DVA has been taking a proactive approach to mitigating the risk of exposure to and transmission of COVID-19 since early March and has implemented a broad range of temporary COVID-19 mitigation protocols. These include restrictions on visitors to the DVA Campus, restrictions on travel by Veterans Residents and Patients, establishing an isolation/quarantine unit in the

Residential Facility, conducting daily health screens of Veterans and restrictions on admissions to the Residential and Healthcare programs. The travel by Veteran Patients is limited to medical appointments and humanitarian circumstances. For any Veterans returning from off Campus hospitalization are subject to enhanced medical screening, verification from the transferring facility that the Veteran has been screened and tested negative for COVID-19, additionally such Veterans are subject to a 14 day isolation. Residential Veteran off Campus passes have been limited to 10 residents per day with a four hour time limit for each pass. Upon the return to Campus the Veteran is subject to inspection of bags and vehicles and an enhanced medical screening. Those Veterans who leave Campus without a pass or who present an increased risk of exposure to COVID-19, are subject to 14 day isolation on Campus. The DVA is providing required personal protective equipment (PPE) to staff and Veterans.

Commissioner Saadi reported that movement on Campus has been restricted and that Residential Veterans may not visit the HCC and vice versa and all off Campus recreational activities have been suspended however, DVA staff is implementing on campus recreation that is social distancing compliant.

Chairman Thomas asked about the inventory of the DVA's PPE to which Commissioner Saadi reported that he DVA has at least a sixty day supply of PPE and, as the burn rate is expected to increase, the DVA is reaching out to current vendors and has submitted requests through WEBEOC for additional supplies to ensure a ninety day supply that is able to handle a COVID-19 surge. Commissioner Saadi reported that he has been in close contact with Federal VA Director Al Montoya and recently had a conference call that included Joseph Danao, Chairman Thomas and Vice-Chairman Nelligan. The call focused on sharing best practices and coordination of efforts in support of Connecticut's Veterans.

Commissioner Saadi reported that while the DVA is responding to COVID-19 regular operations continue including the ADA construction project and other Campus improvements. In closing the Commissioner asked that Trustees help support our Veterans mental health by reaching out to them through email and phone calls, and continue to think outside the box and come up with recreational activities that follow social distancing protocols.

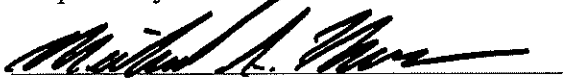
Chairman Thomas asked Trustee Spranzo for his input on the COVID-19 protocols and procedures from the Veteran perspective. Trustee Spranzo stated that his main concern is the mental health of the Veterans with the travel restrictions and suspension of most recreational activities. Commissioner Saadi stated that Director Nieves, Trustee Spranzo and former Veteran Resident President Ron Coveney would work closely together to come up with other recreational activities and travel options.

Chairman Thomas then thanked the DVA staff for their work, energy and continued efforts in keeping up with the challenges during this pandemic.

II. Closing

There being no further business, Chairman Thomas entertained a motion to adjourn. Motion was made and passed unanimously at 3:59 PM.

Respectfully Submitted:



Michael Thomas, Chair
DVA Board of Trustees

Date

April 17, 2020



**Department of Veterans Affairs
State of Connecticut**

**Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes
June 11, 2020**

(Minutes subject to review at next Board Meeting)

I. Convene Meeting:

The Meeting (conducted via Teleconference) was called to order by Chairman Thomas at 3:00 PM.

In attendance: John Banks, Paul Barry, Richard Benson, Philip Cacciola, Juan Cruz, Peter Galgano, Steven Harris, Alyssa Kelleher, Frederick Leaf, Patrick Nelligan, Sharad Samy, Heather Sandler, Mark Spranzo, Michael Thomas, Kjell Tollefsen, Sherri Vogt and Dawn Works-Dennis.

Absent: Richard Dziekan.

In attendance from the DVA: Commissioner Thomas Saadi, Michael Clark, Joseph Danao, Darlene Deschaine, Tammy Marzik, Ryan McKenna, Laura Nelson, and Jane Siegel.

Chairman Thomas entertained a motion to approve the minutes of the previous meeting. Motion made by Trustee Harris and seconded by Trustee Vogt. Motion passed unanimously without any corrections or edits to the minutes.

Chairman Thomas stated that this meeting would primarily cover the topics on the agenda provided. Trustee Benson requested discussion on the Cemetery Master Plan and Wreaths Across America. Chairman Thomas responded that both topics would be discussed on the agenda. Chairman Thomas then asked for Commissioner Thomas Saadi to brief on DVA achievements and events.

Commissioner Saadi spoke briefly about the donations received during the pandemic, these included kindle tablets, televisions, iPads, many personal need items for the comforts of the Veteran Residents and Veteran Patients. The IT items assisted Veterans in connecting with family, friends and needed services including telehealth. Commissioner Saadi reported that on May 5th, the founder & CEO of K&J Tree Service, visited the DVA Campus to thank and display a large flag to honor DVA front-line staff and DVA campus veterans and that the Commissioner, Governor Lamont, Lt. Governor Bysiewicz and Major General Evon conducted the Wall of Honor Ceremony on the Thursday before Memorial Day at the LOB and also conducted the annual Memorial Day Ceremony at Middletown Veterans Cemetery. On May 22nd the Healthcare Center's Annual Memorial Ceremony was held and the American Red Cross joined to extend thanks to the First Line Staff and to DVA veterans, all of which complied with social distancing and mask guidelines. On May 26th DVA's Residential Facility held their annual Memorial Day Ceremony.

The upcoming events include a DVA Residential Flag Day Ceremony on June 15th, Stand Down on or about September 25th, which will be a blend of virtual and in person events. November 7th will be the Annual AT&T 3 Miler and for Veterans Day, November 11th there will be a 2:00 pm ceremony at the Middletown State Veterans Cemetery as well as a 3:00 pm ceremony at the DVA campus.

II. Old/Ongoing Business

A. COVID-19 Response & Recovery

Commissioner Saadi reported on the DVA website links that provide information to the public regarding COVID-19 Mitigation Protocols as well as the updates sent out daily to the DVA Stakeholders. He highlighted the DVA's comprehensive COVID-19 Mitigation Protocols and the daily operations and programmatic calls and teams meetings with and among DVA Staff. This provided and continues to provide the Commissioner and agency leaders with a full spectrum view of data, logistic, projects and other issues across the DVA's four core functions. Commissioner Saadi reported on the DVA website link with all agency updates and COVID-19 Protocols and changes. Commissioner Saadi reported the testing of over 220 veteran residents, majority of which have been tested multiple times. Twenty-four Veteran Patients and Residents tested positive, with twenty-one recovering and three deaths in late April and early May. A total of four staff members tested positive, all have returned to work consisted with CDC and DPH guidelines to work at the facility. The infection rates of staff and veterans on the DVA campus is significantly lower than many other veterans' homes and healthcare facilities. Commissioner Saadi highlighted the support The DVA agency had been supported during this pandemic from many state agencies as well as Director Al Montoya of the Federal VA. CT state lab also gave our agency many tests and processed the tests, it gave us significant testing capacity. The agency has plenty of PPE and supplies. Currently some of the DVA staff is teleworking and will continue to do so until the state reopens. The Commissioner went on to explain that DVA never closed due to the nature of this agency, however, the DVA will roll back on the telework and have people return to the campus and reestablishing access to some of the programs that were limited due to the pandemic. This includes reopening admissions to HCC and residential as well as some of the managers returning to work on campus a couple days a week. Next week the CT DVA will be moving from an Emergency Protocol to a Recovery Phase.

B. Healthcare Center Report

Director Nelson reported on the COVID-19 adjustments in the Skilled Nursing Facility which included establishing a COVID-19 Isolation and Recovery Unit, built capacity in supply lines of PPE through internal efficiencies, training and use of WEBEOC. Increased number of tests and improved timeframe for obtaining results through partnership with the Federal VA. Ms. Nelson also reported that all Staff and Veteran Patients are routinely screened On-going staff support and training in accordance with CDC, DPH, CMS and Federal VA. She explained that, in accordance with DVA Protocols and CDC guidelines social and recreational activities were redesigned, meals were delivered to rooms and sanitizing and disinfection procedures were expanded. DPH conduct a point prevalence Survey on May 27 testing all Veteran Patients with all testing negative for the virus.

Director. Nelson reported that to date DPH has conducted five inspections on April 27th, May 10th, May 21st and June 3rd and the Federal VA visited on May 5th. The HCC was found to be in substantial compliance and was not cited for any deficiencies. Chairman Thomas asked if any of the veterans had any adverse reactions to the administration of the drug Hydrochloriquine and Director Nelson responded that there were no adverse reactions.

C. Residential Programs & Services

Commissioner Saadi reported on Residential Programs & Services as Director Nieves is on military duty. Day-to-day operations of the Residential Facility and the daily activities of residents changed with the implementation of the COVID-19 Enhanced Health & Safety Protocols. These protocols included a ban on visitors to the Campus, restrictions on travel by Veteran Residents, screening and testing of Veteran Residents and the establishment of a COVID19 Isolation and Recovery Unit in the Residential Facility. As part of the screening and testing regime DVA Residential staff were supplemented by two Medics from the CT National Guard and temporary contract clinical workers. The regular shopping trips were cancelled for a period of time, but have resumed on an incremental manner following CDC guidelines and accommodations have been made for residents to conduct essential banking and shopping as needed. Various individual recreational services and support services were provided (Walk for Wellness; Arts & Crafts Supplies; Musical Instruments; Virtual individual recreational services info options provided as well as Virtual Religious services options). On May 22nd travel restrictions were modified to allow residents to travel off campus.

Commissioner Saadi reported on the recent Protocol modifications which include Veteran Residents being able to travel off campus, food vendors having access to the Campus and on Campus expansion of recreational activities and recreational facilities on Campus resuming operation later this month. Regular screening and testing of Veteran Residents will continue through the end of June and after a respite will resume in late July to determine whether any community spread is entering the Campus.

D. Budgeting and Staffing

DVA Fiscal Manager Michael Clark provided an update on the budget and staffing trends. He reported that this is the fifteenth year that DVA will end the fiscal year with a balanced budget. The DVA's budget is 25.5 million dollars. Highlights of the fiscal operations is as follows:

- The Fiscal Department re-designated DVA's warehouse and mailroom staff essential status to ensure uninterrupted supplies and delivery.
- Fiscal equipped the office staff with the ability to telework to conduct the procurement, accounts payables, accounting, payroll, and fiscal administration operation, purchasing requests reviewed, purchase orders issued, invoices are paid, employees timesheets are validated and paid, required reports are prepared and submitted, etc.
- The supplies and inventories levels of personal protective equipment (PPE) are monitored on a daily basis with coordinated efforts among facility, central supply room, and fiscal supervisor.
- Fiscal Office is working with all departments to tracking all COVID-19 related expenditures, which included overtime, PPE, cleaning supplies, and supplemental staffing as needed.
- Commissioner Saadi waived March, April, and May 2020 program fees for the Residential Veterans.

Chairman Thomas asked if the current supply of PPE will hold up for a potential second wave and Mr. Clark answered that supplies are sufficient and that DVA is building a 90 day supply reserve.

E. Projects Report

Projects and Operations Director Joe Danao provided a general DVA Projects update which include the Cemetery Appearance project which has restarted. On the Rocky Hill Campus the abatement projects need funding from DAS for buildings number five, number 60 and number 51. The Fire Alarm and Suppression System is complete and the ADA Upgrades for buildings number 2, number 3 and number 4 is ongoing. The Quality of Life Improvements for D-Wing are in execution phase, currently awaiting the establishment of a COVID-19 Isolation and Recovery Unit in A-wing which is in the design phase.

On January 31, 2020 the Bond Commission met and approved the following requests. 1.2 million in State matching funds for the DVA ADA project and \$250,000 for DVA minor capital repair projects. A new request has been submitted for \$215,000 for DVA minor capital repairs.

Director Danao reported on Operational Support during the COVID-19 pandemic which included establishing two COVID-19 isolation wings which will be maintained. Daily disinfection regime continues in areas of the Residential and HCC facilities. Ran the DVA Emergency Operations Center, established Operating, 24/7 situational awareness & common operating picture, monitored DVA daily operational rhythm which included overall support to all DVA staff and Veterans with a daily presence on campus and support of bubbles and barriers approach to mitigate spread of COVID-1. Oversaw digital transformation including IT initiatives to enable work from home for all staff, Office 365, laptops, VPN access and update DVA website daily.

F. Cemetery Property Acquisition

Commissioner Saadi reported on the Cemetery Property Acquisition which has been in a talking phase with DAS Commissioner Geballe. The largest parcel, and the only once contiguous to the Veterans Cemetery, is a 13.65 acre lot designated as site A and is owned by St. Mary's Parish of Middletown. It is locked between the Veterans Cemetery, Cavalry Cemetery and a private medical business. By acquiring this property, the DVA would be able to continue burial operations at a single contiguous cemetery. This matter is not only a priority for the DVA, it is also of great concern to thousands of Connecticut Veterans and statewide Veterans Organizations, the DVA Board of Trustees and Lt. Governor Susan Bysiewicz.

III. New Business

A. Stand Down Update

Commissioner Saadi reported that DVA intends to hold a modified Stand Down the week of September 20th, possibly on multiple days, which will be a blend of virtual and in person platforms to provide access to programs, services and personal needs items. The agency has sent out letters to all providers asking for input as to ability to participate this year and whether they can participate virtually and for those that provide physical items whether they can distribute at DVA campus and/or in different regions of the State.

B. Building 50 – Tenant Orgs. & DVA Operation Reoccupation

Building 50, which was renovated last year and occupied by several Veteran Service organizations, non-profit providers and DVA services will be open for reoccupation by those entities for operational functions consistent with the State's reopening plans

C. Chairperson Report

Chairman Thomas asked if there were any concerns or questions to address the Commissioner. Trustee Benson was concerned about Wreathes Across American and the Cemetery Master Plan. There was discussion among the trustees regarding the need to move forward with ensuring that all organizations that sell wreaths for placement at the Cemetery must disclose whether they raise money and to what programs those funds are applied. Commissioner Saadi explained that he will be sending a letter to those organizations stating that they must disclose such information in the written and online communications.

Trustees Benson and Barry expressed concerns regarding compliance with the Federal Survey and Cemetery Master plan recommendations. Commissioner Saadi explained that the DVA is addressing all concerns raised during the Federal Survey and that a follow on inspection will be conducted by the National Cemetery Administration in September 2020. The Commissioner further explained that the recommendations in the Master Plan are goals to achieve however, no federal dollars are in jeopardy and achieving the recommendation will take time and that the fact that such items are in the master plan actually supports DVA requests for federal funding.

Commissioner Saadi also provided a brief on the DVA efforts in moving forward with the property acquisition process in collaboration with the Department of Administrative Services.

Chairman Thomas stated that several Legislative Leaders are retiring this November so it is important for those on the board that are affected by this should to contact their appointment authorities for guidance. The following individuals are retiring; Senator Martin Looney (appointed Trustee Frederick Leaf); Representative Len Fasano (appointed Co-Chair Patrick Nelligan); Representative Joe Aresimowicz (appointed Trustee Peter Galgano); and Representative Themis Klarides (appointed Trustee Richard Dziekan).

IV. Closing

There being no further business, Chairman Thomas entertained a motion to adjourn. The next board meeting will be Wednesday, August 26th at 3:00 pm. The meeting will be held on the DVA campus, meeting room to be determined at a later date. Motion was made and passed unanimously at 5:30 PM.

Respectfully Submitted:



Michael Thomas, Chair
DVA Board of Trustees

Date 7/2/2020



**Department of Veterans Affairs
State of Connecticut**

**Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes
August 26, 2020**

(Minutes subject to review at next Board Meeting)

I. Convene Meeting:

The Meeting (conducted via Teleconference) was called to order by Chairman Thomas at 3:00 PM.

In attendance: John Banks, Richard Benson, Philip Cacciola, Juan Cruz, Peter Galgano, Steven Harris, Frederick Leaf, Patrick Nelligan, Sharad Samy, Heather Sandler, Mark Spranzo, Michael Thomas, Kjell Tollefsen, Sherri Vogt and Dawn Works-Dennis.

Absent: Paul Barry, Alyssa Kelleher

In attendance from the DVA: Commissioner Thomas Saadi, Michael Clark, Joseph Danao, Darlene Deschaine, Tammy Marzik, Leslie Nieves, and Ryan McKenna.

Chairman Thomas entertained a motion to approve the minutes of the previous meeting. Motion made by Trustee Samy and seconded by Trustee Vogt. Motion passed unanimously without any corrections or edits to the minutes.

Chairman Thomas stated that this meeting would primarily cover the topics on the agenda provided. Chairman Thomas then asked for Commissioner Thomas Saadi to brief on DVA achievements and events.

Commissioner Saadi spoke briefly about the donations received during the pandemic, these included 45,000 bottles of water for use at Stand Down and other DVA Veteran events. Commissioner Saadi reported that he presented Quilts of Valor to several Veterans in the Residential Facility as well as presenting Veteran Council President Mark Spranzo with a Citation from Governor Lamont and a Certificate of Appreciation from the DVA. On July 21st the CT Air National Guard assisted DVA Staff with a full PIT Count within the Residential Facility. On August 15th Commissioner Saadi served as the Master of Ceremonies for the Danbury Veterans Council commemoration of 75 years since the victories in World War II.

The upcoming events include Stand Down Virtual Sessions on Thursday, September 24th and Stand Down in person events on Friday, September 25th to take place at several locations, Bridgeport, Danbury, Rocky Hill and Norwich. On November 7th there will be a Patriots Park Race in Coventry and on November 11th there will be a 2:00 pm ceremony at the Middletown State Veterans Cemetery as well as a 3:00 pm ceremony at the DVA campus.

II. Old/Ongoing Business

A. COVID-19 Response & Recovery

Commissioner Saadi reported on the DVA website links that provide information to the public regarding COVID-19 Mitigation Protocols as well as the updates sent out daily to the DVA Stakeholders. Currently there are no veteran residents or veteran patients that have tested positive. One staff member in the HCC tested positive, who then returned to work consisting with CDC and DPH guidelines to work at the facility. Due to this employees testing positive 16 veteran patients were placed into isolation, however, they are in the green zone and have all tested negative. Commissioner Saadi stated the agency has plenty of PPE and supplies.

B. Budgeting and Staffing

Chairman Thomas recognized Fiscal Manager Michael Clark from DVA's Fiscal Office who gave an update on the budget and staffing trends. He reports that the DVA has a budget of 25.5 million dollars and the DVA came \$286,000 under budget. The biggest expense for this quarter was funding for additional staffing and overtime due to the pandemic. Mr. Clark reported that he used a supply chain management model to set up the inventory of testing kits, schedule of testing staff and vets as well as building services of staff.

C. Projects Report

Projects and Operations Director Joe Danao provided a general DVA Projects update which include the Cemetery Appearance project, the Cemetery Expansion and the Cemetery Services Master Plan, all of which are completed. On the Rocky Hill Campus the abatement projects started in Buildings #5 and #60, with a no start date on Building #51. The ADA Upgrades are 40% complete in Buildings #2, #3 and #4. The Campus Security System is in the planning phase, the DVA Water Improvement Project is in the programming phase and the DVA Energy Efficiency Project was awarded a DEEP Grant for \$270,000. Quality of Life Improvements include the D-Wing Renovation which is 70% complete. A-Wing Renovation is setting up an isolation wing which is 30% complete. The next bond meeting is scheduled for September 25, 2020 and the new request is \$215,000 for minor capital repairs.

D. Cemetery Property Acquisition

Commissioner Saadi reported on the Cemetery Property Acquisition. Currently DVA is awaiting completion of property appraisals (two) being conducted by DAS vendors and some bonding funds need to be identified and available for allocation to purchase property. The Commissioner went on to state that if the appraisals are within an acceptable range discussions can begin, additional bonding will need to be identified and informational updates must be discussed with the Lt. Governor and the Legislature.

III. New Business

A. Storm Isaias Recovery

Commissioner Saadi reported the DVA activated its Emergency Operations Center (EOC) on Monday August 3rd to prepare for Storm Isaias. As a result of the storm, many trees were uprooted and

power lines downed causing loss of public utility power to the Campus and several buildings sustained roof and other damage. DVA's emergency generators kick in powering the Campus. After operating on DVA's emergency generators and a supplemental generator from Eversource, utility power was restored on Tuesday August 11th. The DVA is in the process of repairing roofs and addressing other urgent repairs, conducting detailed damage assessment and developing plans for long-term repairs and the strengthening of infrastructure.

B. Stand Down 2020

Director Lesbia Nieves reported that Stand Down 2020 will be held on two days beginning Thursday, September 24th, with a brief kickoff ceremony at 9:00 am at the DVA Rocky Hill Campus, followed by online informational sessions and webinars conducted by the DVA and other agencies and community service providers. Veterans will be able to register, beginning on 9/1/2020, for events for the portions that they are interested in participating to include attendance to the second day event at various distribution locations. On Friday, September 25th from 8am to 3pm the DVA will coordinate distribution of personal need items to Veterans by Veteran Service Organizations and community based non-profits at four locations. All four sites will have COVID-19 testing and flu shots.

C. BOT Wreaths Across America – COL Gates Cemetery Ceremony

Chairman Thomas asked Trustee Vogt to report on the Wreaths Across America event. Trustee Vogt reported that the subcommittee has prepared a solicitation letter regarding raising funds for the Colonel Gates wreaths for this year's event. Trustee Vogt recommends submitting the letter to various businesses such as PWA, EB and any other large businesses that the board could recommend. All monies for this event must be submitted by November 30th to the Wreaths Across America main branch in Maine.

IV. Closing

Due to time constraints Chairman Thomas suggested that the board meet soon to address Cemetery issues and set a date for the next board meeting. Motion was made and passed unanimously at 4:30 PM.

Respectfully Submitted:



Michael Thomas, Chair
DVA Board of Trustees

Date 9/21/20



**Department of Veterans Affairs
State of Connecticut**

**Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes – Special Meeting re: DVA Veterans Subcommittee
Cemetery Proposals
September 2, 2020**

(Minutes subject to review at next Board Meeting)

I. Convene Meeting:

The Meeting (conducted via Teleconference) was called to order by Chairman Thomas at 1:00 PM.

In attendance: Paul Barry, Richard Benson, Philip Cacciola, Juan Cruz, Steven Harris, Alyssa Kelleher, Sharad Samy, Heather Sandler, Michael Thomas and Kjell Tollefsen.

Absent: John Banks, Richard Dziekan, Peter Galgano, Frederick Leaf, Patrick Nelligan, Mark Spranzo, Sherri Vogt and Dawn Works-Dennis

In attendance from the DVA: Commissioner Thomas Saadi, Michael Clark, Darlene Deschaine, and Tammy Marzik.

Chairman Thomas stated that this meeting concerns the DVA Cemetery Subcommittee proposals. Chairman Thomas then asked for Trustee Barry to address the board with the proposals.

Trustee Barry reported that the DVA Board of Trustees Cemetery Subcommittee recommends that the Board pass two resolutions as follows: (1) That the DVA implement a spousal interment fee of \$350 for burial at the State Veterans Cemetery in Middletown, with the funds specifically dedicated to a budget line item for the perpetual care and maintenance of the DVA Cemeteries. Trustee Barry explained that the recommendation is based on the common practice of most state veteran cemeteries in the northeast region and that of Federal Veteran Cemeteries, Also, there is a clear need for additional funds and resources to maintaining the State Veteran Cemetery; and (2) Recommending that the General Assembly Veteran Affairs Committee introduce legislation to allocate the Federal Plot Allowance Fees directly to a line item in the DVA budget for perpetual care and maintenance of the CT State Veterans Cemeteries. This allocation shall not reduce the cemetery budget, except for the DVA cemetery staff salaries shall be reallocated to DVA salaries line item to the new cemetery operations line item. The motion was seconded by Trustee Cacciola.

Chairman Thomas recognized Trustee Benson who then recommended additional language to the Spousal fee proposal to have different fees based on type of interment such as traditional burial or cremation. Trustee Barry accepted the proposal by Trustee Benson as a friendly amendment and encouraged approval of the motion as amended which reads, the CT DVA Board of Trustees Cemetery

Sub Committee recommends the Board pass a resolution recommending that the DVA implement a Spousal Internment Fee of \$350 for cremation burials and \$500 for full burials for CT State Veterans Cemeteries. These funds shall be specifically dedicated to Cemetery Operations line item for perpetual care and maintenance. This recommendation is based on the best and common practices of many State Veterans Cemeteries in our region and that of the federal Veterans Cemeteries and as there is a clear need for additional funds and resources to maintain our CT State Veterans Cemeteries.

Trustee Samy asked the board's sentiment to the proposed resolution, primarily cremation vs. burial and the opening up of spousal's burial and the spousal fee. Commissioner Saadi stated that spousal internments are currently permitted and therefore the only issue is whether there should be a fee. Trustee Barry asked for input as to whether this spousal charge should be prospective only so that anyone who has already made arraignments will not be subject to the fee. Trustee Benson suggests that the spousal fee charge be prospective only.

Chairman Thomas then asked for a vote on the proposal as amended which passed unanimously.

Chairman Thomas asked for a motion on the proposal regarding the recommendation that the General Assembly Veteran Affairs Committee introduce legislation to allocate the Federal Plot Allowance Fees directly to a line item in the DVA budget for perpetual care and maintenance of the CT State Veterans Cemeteries. This allocation shall not reduce the cemetery budget, except for the DVA cemetery staff salaries shall be reallocated to DVA salaries line item to the new cemetery operations line item. The motion was seconded by Trustee Cacciola. Trustee Benson made a motion and Trustee Cacciola seconded. During discussion Trustee Barry stated that this would bring approximately \$465,000 to this line item. Commissioner Saadi explained that these matters would require legislative action in order to direct any such funds to the DVA as all such federal allowances, reimbursements and fee go to the General Fund. Motion was made and passed unanimously.

II. Closing

Chairman Thomas asked the sub-committee to send him the final text so that he may forward to the General Assembly Veterans Affairs Committee for consideration. There being no further business before the BOT a motion was made to adjourn which passed unanimously at 1:34 PM.

Respectfully Submitted:



Michael Thomas, Chair
DVA Board of Trustees

Date 9/11/2020



**Department of Veterans Affairs
State of Connecticut**

**Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes
December 2, 2020**

(Minutes subject to review at next Board Meeting)

I. Convene Meeting:

The Meeting (conducted via Teams meeting platform) was called to order by Co-Chairman Nelligan at 3:12 PM.

In attendance: John Banks, Paul Barry, Richard Benson, Juan Cruz, Peter Galgano, Steven Harris, Frederick Leaf, Patrick Nelligan, Sharad Samy, Heather Sandler, Michael Thomas (joined the meeting late due to work obligations), Dawn Works-Dennis.

Absent: Phil Cacciola, Richard Dziekan, Alyssa Kelleher, Mark Spranzo, Kjell Tollefsen, Sherri Vogt.

In attendance from the DVA: Commissioner Thomas Saadi, Joseph Danao, Darlene Deschaine, Tammy Marzik, Briana Mitchell, Leslie Nieves, and Ryan McKenna. In attendance as an observer from Connecticut House Republicans, Mr. Andrew Droney.

Vice-Chair Nelligan, entertained a motion to approve the minutes of the previous meeting. Motion made by Trustee Harris and seconded by Trustee Sandler. Motion passed unanimously without any corrections or edits to the minutes.

Vice-Chairman Nelligan asked for Commissioner Thomas Saadi to brief on DVA achievements and events.

Commissioner Saadi spoke briefly about the events that took place this past quarter. Stand Down was a two-day event, with virtual information sessions on the first day and personal needs items were distributed and Veteran services available at four regional locations on the second day. On October 22nd a DVA Residential Town Hall Meeting was held to discuss the current pandemic and other topics, it was in the DVA auditorium following physical distance protocols and wearing of masks. November 7th the Commissioner participated in the Coventry Patriots Day 4 Mile Race, the proceeds given to various Veteran Organization including DVA Veterans Outreach & Support Services. On Veterans Day the Commissioner participated in ceremonies at Regional Hospice in Danbury, at Anthology of Farmington, Town of Rocky Hill and at the State Veterans Cemetery in Middletown. Commissioner Saadi reported that Immaculate High School in Danbury donated \$1,200 as did S&P Oyster House in Mystic to assist with DVA Veteran outreach.

The upcoming events include DVA OA&A Virtual Town Hall on December 9th, Wreaths Across America Convoy on December 17th, Wreaths Across America event on December 19th at State Veterans Cemetery and Colonel Gates Cemetery. The CT Veterans Hall of Fame inductees has been postponed to spring of 2021, for the class of 2020.

II. Old/Ongoing Business

A. COVID-19 Response & Recovery

Commissioner Saadi reported DVA point in time testing and positivity data with two hundred and thirty-seven Veteran Residents and Patients having been tested for COVID-19. Thirty-one testing positive, the majority occurred early in the pandemic. Twenty-four recovered from the virus and two are currently in the Residential Isolation Unit and two are currently in the Healthcare Isolation Unit. One Veteran Resident and two Veteran Patients passed away in the spring from COVID-19 complications. The Commissioner went on to report that COVID-19 testing has been taking place for all direct care and front-line DVA staff members weekly since early July. Total of 23 staff members tested positive to date. Majority of these positive results, 17, occurred between October 3rd & December 2nd.

Trustee Samy asked about the roll out of the COVID vaccine. Commissioner Saadi reported that the DVA is registered with CMS and DPH for vaccines for the staff and Veteran Residents and Patients. The administration has outlined a timeline for distribution: Phase 1a will include healthcare workers, nursing home residents and medical first responders. Phase 1b will include critical workforce, other congregate settings, adults 65 and up and anyone considered "high-risk" under age 65. Phase 2 will include anyone under 18-years-old, remaining residents over 18-years-old. Distribution may begin later this month.

Commissioner Saadi reported on the DVA website links that provide information to the public regarding COVID-19 Mitigation Protocols as well as the updates sent out daily to the DVA Stakeholders. There is a single updated DVA COVID-19 mitigation protocol which contains all of the current COVID-19 mitigation protocols. Command Mitigation Huddle is held Monday, Wednesdays and Fridays; PERSTAT is held every weekday. Commissioner Saadi reported that telework has been extended for the Administrative staff, which follows the protocol of non-essential staff be present at a 50 percent capacity. Commissioner Saadi also reported that the DVA is bringing on an HR Business Partner who will be on campus, Bethanne Watts. She will be reporting directly to DAS due to the centralization.

B. Budgeting and Staffing

Commissioner Saadi recognized newly appointed Fiscal Director Briana Mitchell from DVA's Fiscal Office who gave an update on the budget and staffing trends. She reports that the DVA has a budget of 26.5 million dollars. OPM has asked all agencies to make rescissions to their budgets, DVA has been asked to cut approximately \$198,000 from its personal expenses and \$14,500 from its operating expenses which is in addition to the current \$600,000 holdback of DVA appropriated funds. Ms. Mitchell stated that additional rescissions to DVA's budget would affect the delivery services to CT's veterans. Ms. Mitchell went on to report that the DVA has been able to keep agency warehouse and mailroom employees as essential staff status to ensure uninterrupted service. Staffing and overtime this past quarter were one of the biggest expenditures for COVID related issues.

Trustee Barry asked if the fiscal department could provide the BOT with a rundown of the DVA's appropriations and expenditures as well as a roll up of the IGW for the past ten years. Commissioner Saadi stated that the fiscal department will prepare the report and he will distribute within the next week.

C. Projects Report

Projects and Operations Director Joe Danao provided a general DVA Projects update which include the Cemetery Appearance project, the Cemetery Expansion and the Cemetery Services Master Plan, all of which are completed. On the Rocky Hill Campus, further asbestos abatement projects are waiting for funding and the DVA fire alarm and sprinkler project is complete. Upgrades to the Campus Security System is waiting funding, the DVA Water Improvement Project is in the programming phase, also currently awaiting more funding and the DVA Energy Efficiency Project was awarded a DEEP Grant for \$270,000. Quality of Life Improvements include the D-Wing Renovation which is near completion. A-Wing build out of long-term COVID-19 Isolation wing is also near completion. The next Bond Commission meeting is scheduled for December 11, 2020 and the DVA pending request is \$215,000 for minor capital repairs and emergency repairs. DVA is moving forward with a WiFi upgrade using donations and will not come out of DVA budget. Commissioner Saadi noted that the extension of the semi-private living program will next be in D-Wing the renovation of which has been accomplished without any additional appropriations.

D. Cemetery Property Acquisition

Commissioner Saadi reported on the Cemetery property acquisition including discussions with St. Mary's Parish related to the acquisition of the 13.6 acre parcel. The DVA has received the appraisals and made an offer of \$350,000 which was initially rejected by the parish. The parish real-estate broker then contacted DAS property acquisition asking for the DVA to make another offer to which the response was that the Parish needed to make a good faith counteroffer. No such counteroffer has been received. Commissioner Saadi explained that he will be meeting with DAS property acquisition staff next week to direct them to begin the process of acquisition of the two other parcels identified in the Cemetery Master Plan across Bow Lane from the current Cemetery. One parcel is owned by a CT state agency and the other is privately owned. Commissioner also reported that DVA now owns Cottage 22 and the land around which has been incorporated as part of the Cemetery property. DVA staff has a plan for repairs and improvements to Cottage 22 which was acquired with no cost to the DVA.

III. New Business

A. BOT Wreaths Across America Ceremony at Middletown & COL Gates Cemetery

Commissioner reported that Civil Air Patrol (CAP) has confirmed that they continue to sell wreaths through the Wreaths Across America platform however they are doing so at cost and will not make any profit from the event this year which had been an ongoing concern of many BOT members due to transparency and disclosure issues. Ryan McKenna reported that every grave at the cemetery will have a wreath and the ceremony is planned for December 19th at noon. The wreaths will remain on the graves until approximately the third week of January. The wreaths are to be delivered on December 17th; there will a rally at Stop & Shop in Cromwell in the morning. The convoy will then proceed to CT State Veterans Cemetery to unload palletized wreaths. Staff and volunteers will place a limited amount of wreaths prior to the event due to the 150-person limit on the day of the event. Parking will be within the

cemetery. This year there will be no busses allowed and no vending trucks will be present. There will be a simultaneous event at Gates Cemetery.

IV. Closing

Commissioner Saadi asked the Board to adopt a regular meeting schedule for the next year so it may be posted with the Secretary of State due statutory mandates. Chairman Thomas who joined the meeting at approximately 4:30, suggested that the board meet soon to address next year's schedule and set a date for the next board meeting. Motion to adjourn was made and passed unanimously at 4:36 PM.

Respectfully Submitted:



Michael Thomas, Chair
DVA Board of Trustees

Date 3/25/21



**Department of Veterans Affairs
State of Connecticut**

**Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes
March 10, 2021**

(Minutes subject to review at next Board Meeting)

I. Convene Meeting:

The Meeting (conducted via Teams meeting platform) was called to order by Chairman Thomas at 3:35 PM.

In attendance: John Banks, Paul Barry, Phil Cacciola, Juan Cruz, Richard Dziekan, Peter Galgano, Steven Harris, Alyssa Kelleher, Patrick Nelligan, Sharad Samy, Heather Sandler, Michael Thomas, Kjell Tollefsen, Sherri Vogt and Dawn Works-Dennis.

Absent: Richard Benson, Frederick Leaf and Mark Spranzo

In attendance from the DVA: Commissioner Thomas Saadi, Joseph Danao, Darlene Deschaine, Tammy Marzik, Briana Mitchell, Ryan McKenna and Jane Siegel.

Chairman Thomas entertained a motion to approve the minutes of the previous meeting. Motion made by Trustee Harris and seconded by Trustee Kelleher. Motion passed unanimously without any corrections or edits to the minutes.

Chairman Thomas asked Commissioner Saadi to brief on DVA achievements and events.

Commissioner Saadi spoke briefly about the events that took place since December 2020 including the January 25th Ribbon Cutting & dedication of another Quality of Life Improvement Project specifically updated semi-private rooms in D-Wing. On February 3rd the DVA hosted State Senator Cicarella for a briefing on DVA operations and tour of the Campus. During the tour the Senator met with CT National Guard personnel conducting critical training exercises related to chemical, biological radiological, nuclear and explosive response operations. Commissioner Saadi reported that the DVA was at the forefront of coordinating COVID-19 vaccine clinics for DVA Veterans and Staff at the Rocky Hill Campus and that to date more than 90% of DVA Veteran Residents and Patients and over 50% of DVA staff have been vaccinated. On February 25th the DVA hosted its annual ceremony commemorating Black History Month with Keynote Speaker Vanessa Dorantes, Commissioner of the Department of Children and Families (DCF). The ceremony included remarks by Commissioner Saadi, Residential Director Lesbia Nieves and poems and songs by DVA Veterans and staff. The event was held in the DVA auditorium and broadcast via Teams and Zoom.

The upcoming events include DVA Veterans Service Organization Leaders Quarterly Meeting hosted by Commissioner Saadi on March 23rd, DVA Campus ADA and other Residential projects Ribbon Cutting on April 21st, DVA Veteran Memorial Service in the Healing Garden on May 27th, a Gold Star Family Event at a date to be determined and the CT Veterans Hall of Fame inductees for the class of 2020, to be held in July or August.

II. Old/Ongoing Business

A. COVID-19 Response & Recovery

Commissioner Saadi reported DVA point in time testing and positivity data with two hundred and forty-one Veteran Residents and Patients having been tested for COVID-19. Sixty-nine testing positive, with sixty-three having recovered from the virus and no Veterans in the Residential or Healthcare COVID Isolation Units. One Veteran Resident and two Veteran Patients passed away in the spring from COVID-19 complications and two Veteran Patients passed away in December and January. One Veteran Patient with COVID-19 passed in December from a non-COVID-19 medical occurrence.

Commissioner Saadi reported that the DVA has been conducting regular COVID-19 testing all direct care and front-line staff since July, fifty-seven staff members tested COVID-19 positive since the beginning of the pandemic, fifty-six recovered and returned to work consistent with DPH guidelines. One DVA staff member remains out and in physical rehab.

B. Budgeting and Staffing

Chairman Thomas recognized DVA Fiscal Director Briana Mitchell for an update on the budget and staffing trends. She reports that the DVA has a budget of 26.5 million dollars which is flat funding based on the current budget. Ms. Mitchell reported that the DVA billing department celebrated its first and successful Medicare submission and payment since the transition of the Healthcare Center to a Skilled Nursing Facility. These funds from Medicare revenue will be deposited into the State's General Fund. Fiscal year 2021 overtime averages currently higher than previous two fiscal years, COVID-19 Relief Funds have been exhausted and there were some retirement payouts as well. The Fiscal department is performing an in-depth review of all DVA appropriations and expenditures to ensure responsible spending and effective fiscal oversight. Trustee Vogt asked if there was an opportunity to apply for federal dollars to cover expenses incurred due to COVID-19 staffing and Ms. Mitchell responded that the DVA did receive and has exhausted its COVID-19 relief funds.

Chairman Thomas asked Commissioner Saadi to update the board on the IGW (Institutional General Welfare Fund). Commissioner Saadi reported that in working with DVA Fiscal staff he is implementing the realignment of expenditures from the IGW and has also identified areas of savings. A total of \$796,000 of expenditures is to be shifted from the IGW through spending cuts and reallocations. He reported projected savings of \$175,000 by ending consultant support to DVA Healthcare Center, a total of \$540,000 to be shifted Other Expenses (OE) to pay for medical supplies, specialty medical bed rental and laundering service for the Healthcare Center, \$81,000 of varied IGW expenses to be shifted to donations. Commissioner Saadi also reported \$84,000 in projected saved by ending two temporary support services staff contracts. While these steps will not yet achieve long term solvency they will extend IGW solvency concurrent with FY22 and FY23 allowing time to implement additional changes to achieve long-term solvency. The DVA will need to find OE savings to avoid a deficit however, should

the DVA run a deficit the Commissioner will work with OPM and the Financial Advisory Committee (FAC) to cover the DVA obligations.

Trustee Dziekan asked if the 2021 CARES Act funds would benefit the DVA. Commissioner Saadi reported that the CARES Act law allocates several billion dollars to the State of Connecticut however, it is unclear as to how the funds will be distributed and whether the DVA will receive any direct funding.

C. Projects Report

Projects and Operations Director Joe Danao provided a DVA projects update which include the completion of the two Cemetery Projects – expansion and appearance, the abatement projects in building 2, the Cantina and Building 22 at the Middletown State Veterans Cemetery. He also reported completion of the Fire Alarm and Suppression System project and near completion of the ADA upgrades to Buildings 2, 3, and 4. A bond request has been submitted for \$82,000 for a design replacement of the boiler. The DVA Energy Efficiency Project is in Phase II, DEEP grant approved \$270,000 for metering. Commissioner Saadi's directed Residential Facility Quality of Life Improvements are proceeding including the completion of A-Wing Isolation Unit and D-Wing semiprivate living upgrades, planning for another residential Wing to be upgraded, WiFi expansion and upgrades and general repairs and painting.

D. Cemetery Property Acquisition

Commissioner Saadi reported that the DVA has received the appraisals and made an offer of \$350,000 for the 13.6 acres of land abutting the Veterans Cemetery in Middletown which was initially rejected by the parish. The DAS State Property division then contacted the parish and asked for reconsideration of the outright rejection and to make a good faith counteroffer. Unfortunately the parish rejected further discussions absent the DVA increasing its offer. The acquisition of St. Mary's parcel would extend the operational life of the cemetery by decades allowing for the addition of 4,025 standard plots, 7,000 cremation plots and 6,000 columbarium niches. Commissioner Saadi contacted DMHAS Commissioner Delphin-Rittmon regarding an eight-acre parcel on Bow Lane owned by CVH. Commissioner Delphin-Rittmon is agreeable to the transfer of the property to the DVA however the DMHAS legal department advised that the property must remain in CVH inventory until conclusion of ongoing litigation. The next step is possibly increasing the offer to St. Mary's Parish and continue discussions with CVH pending the outcome of litigation. Commissioner Saadi will update the Lt Governor Susan Bysiewicz who is in full support of the DVA acquiring additional property for the Cemetery.

E. Wreaths Across America Ceremony Planning for December 2021

Ryan McKenna, Director of Advocacy and Assistance, reported that approximately 150 people attended the Wreaths Across America Ceremony on December 19, 2020, consistent with the Governor's Executive Orders. This included volunteers from CAP, Patriot Guard Riders, Easterseals, the Middletown Police Department and the Middletown Fire Department. Mr. McKenna reported that he held an After Action Review on February 4th regarding the December, 2020 event which CAP leadership were invited to attend but did not respond. This year's event is planned for December 18th and that there will need to be stakeholder's involvement in the selling of the wreaths. A kickoff meeting will be held in June and bi-weekly meetings will start in mid-September. The stakeholders can discuss fund raising events as well as determining price of the wreaths and profit margin usage.

III. New Business

A. Legislative Update

Commissioner reported on the pending legislation on which he testified in favor of before the General Assembly including expanded benefits for certain Veterans with an Other Than Honorable discharge OTH; Veteran Status question on state forms; recognition of training and skills developed in the military in the issuance of state licenses and registrations; providing certain state Veteran recognitions to members of the Hmong Laotian Special Guerilla Units which supported the U.S. during the Vietnam War; establishing additional registration marker plates for Veterans and members of the Armed forces who served in period of war and an Act concerning workforce development. Commissioner Saadi explained that he testified against a bill which would require the DVA to provide transportation services to Veterans and bill Medicare/Medicaid and Tricare unless the DVA was also provided with funds for a fleet of vehicles and staff to drive them. He explained that the DVA fiscal office would also need additional staff to process billing and that the funds, absent additional legislation, would go to the State's General Fund and not the DVA. Without the additional staff and funds the bill would have a serious negative impact on the direct delivery of current programs and services to our Veterans at our Rocky Hill Campus and across the State. The Commissioner also testified In favor of a task force to study updating the Veterans property tax relief laws and a bill that would direct federal reimbursements for DAV prescription drug purchases to the IGW.

Trustee Barry raised concerns of lack of documentation for Hmong Laotian Veterans and that the DAV would not be able to determine who were bonified Veterans. Commissioner Saadi stated that this was a legislative decision and that the DVA would follow the procedure the Federal National Cemetery Administration follows to determine Hmong Laotian Veterans eligibly for burial in State Veterans Cemeteries.

IV. Closing

Chairman Thomas announced that he is resigning from the Board effective tomorrow due to increased employment obligations and that he recommends that Vice-Chair Nelligan serve as acting Chair and hopes that the Governor will appoint Mr. Nelligan and BOT Chair. Chair Thomas expressed his deep appreciation for the work of the BOT members and highlighted some of the accomplishments especially the close work of the BOT with Commissioner Saadi and the DVA staff throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Per the scheduled dates set by the Board the next meeting is scheduled for June 9th at 3:30, venue to be determined. Motion to adjourn was made and passed unanimously at 5:24 PM.

Respectfully Submitted:



Michael Thomas, Chair
DVA Board of Trustees

Date 3/25/21