



**Department of Veterans Affairs
State of Connecticut**

**Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes
December 15, 2021**

(Minutes subject to review at next Board Meeting)

I. Convene Meeting:

The Meeting was called to order by Vice-Chair Dawn Works-Dennis at 3:33 PM.

In attendance: Paul Barry, Phil Cacciola, Juan Cruz, Richard Dziekan, Peter Galgano, Adele Hodges, Frederick Leaf, Patrick Nelligan, Sherri Vogt and Dawn Works-Dennis.

Absent: John Banks, Richard Benson, Steven Harris, Alyssa Kelleher, Sharad Samy, Heather Sandler and Mark Spranzo.

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

Vice-Chair Works-Dennis entertained a motion to approve the minutes of the previous meeting. Motion made by Trustee Leaf and seconded by Trustee Hodges. Motion passed unanimously without any corrections or edits to the minutes.

Vice-Chair Works-Dennis asked Commissioner Saadi to present recent DVA achievements and events.

Commissioner Saadi spoke about recent events including the DVA 9/11 20th Anniversary Memorial Ceremony at which Lt. Governor Susan Bysiewicz, Federal VA CT Director Al Montoya and CT DESPP Commissioner James Rovella addressed the crowd of more than 125 people, the 2021 Annual Veterans Stand Down which served nearly 1000 Veterans across the state at five regional locations including the DVA Rocky Hill campus and the military funeral held on October 1, 2021 for eight U.S. Veterans' unclaimed cremated remains. Commissioner Saadi also reported on the ceremony he hosted in Danbury to dedicate the Beirut Veterans Monument honoring the U.S. service members who died in the Marine barracks bombing on October 23, 1983. Commissioner Saadi reported of the many events around the state he and other senior DVA leaders attended for Veterans Day including the Coventry Patriot Race, the Enfield Veterans Day Parade, the Immaculate High School (Danbury) Veterans Day program and the Danbury Veterans Day Ceremony. The Commissioner also spoke at the Veterans Day ceremony at the State Veterans Cemetery in Middletown at the DVA main campus ceremony and served as the emcee for the Danbury Exchange Club annual Veterans Recognition Dinner. On December 3rd the DVA, in partnership with the CT Military Department and the Office of Lt. Governor Bysiewicz, hosted the 2021 CT Veterans Hall of Fame induction ceremony and on December 7th Commissioner Saadi served as the

keynote speaker at the Danbury Council of Veterans Pearl Harbor Day 80th Anniversary Remembrance Ceremony.

Upcoming events include the annual Wreaths Across America program on Saturday December 18, 2021 at the State Veterans Cemetery in Middletown and at the COL Gates Veterans Cemetery in Rocky Hill.

Chair Nelligan arrived at 3:50PM.

Old/Ongoing Business

A. COVID-19 Response & Recovery

Commissioner Saadi provided a DVA point in time roll up of testing and COVID data with two hundred and sixty-four Veteran Residents and Patients having been tested for COVID-19 since March 2020. During this time eighty-one Veteran Residents and Patients tested positive, with seventy-six having recovered from the virus, there are no Veterans in Community based COVID Recovery facilities 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 2020 and January 2021. One Veteran Patient with COVID-19 passed in December from a non-COVID-19 medical occurrence. Ninety-nine percent of Veteran Residents and Patients are fully vaccinated.

Commissioner Saadi reported that the DVA has been conducting increased COVID-19 testing of all direct care and front-line staff since October 2021 and that seventy-eight staff members tested COVID-19 positive since the beginning of the pandemic, with seventy-seven staff having recovered and returned to work consistent with DPH guidelines and two remain in recovery. Eighty-nine percent of DVA staff have received the COVID-19 vaccine.

B. Budgeting and Staffing

Chairman Nelligan recognized Fiscal Director Briana Mitchell to update on the budget and staffing trends at the DVA. Ms. Mitchell reported that the projection is for the DVA to close the quarter within available appropriations and expects to do the same for the year subject to the variable of increased spending in response to COVID-19. Responsible shifts in expenditures from IGW to OE and the targeted application of CARES Act funds to cover COVID-19 related expenses continue to improve the fiscal stability of the IGW which was previously projected to be insolvent in mid-2022. Preliminary estimates show DVA remains in fiscal balance for this fiscal year subject to emergency staffing needs in the healthcare facility will be manageable within the Personal Services appropriation. Fiscal Administration is performing an in-depth review of all DVA appropriations and relief funding to ensure responsible spending and effective fiscal oversight. Ms. Mitchell reported that there is a \$600,000 appropriations holdback by OPM.

Trustee Barry asked whether the \$600,000 holdback is used by OPM as a basis for reducing the agency budget in the subsequent year to which Ms. Mitchell and Commissioner Saadi responded in the negative. They also underscored that the DVA has avoided annual budget cuts over the past two years that had been occurring until the last year of the prior administration. Trustee Leaf asked whether the increased Overtime in the Healthcare Center (HCC) was due to staffing shortages. Ms. Mitchell

responded that the OT was driven by the number of vacancies, staff on leave and COVID infections. Commissioner Saadi noted that the DVA has the funds necessary to fully staff however, the hiring/recruitment process can be lengthy and the DVA has lost several good candidates to private providers which pay more than the state or offer generous telework options. Commissioner Saadi explained that the DVA cannot offer the same flexibility for telework as it is a 24/7 direct care agency. As such, DVA staff, particularly facility and Safety and Security personal, are suffering from 'burnout' due to mandating and having to work overtime.

C. Projects Report

Projects and Operations Director Joe Danao began his remarks stating that Commissioner Saadi will provide an update regarding State Veteran Cemetery Property Acquisition separate from the Projects report. Mr. Danao reported that the Rocky Hill campus asbestos abatement of Building 5 is ongoing. The Campus Security System for the New Gatehouse is in the planning phase and water improvement project is in the programming phase. The DVA is proceeding with pre-design and sourcing state and federal funds necessary to build a needed second boiler as the DVA has only one operational boiler with the legally required backup provided through a monthly boiler rental costing \$31k per month. The DVA Energy Efficiency Project is in Phase II and DEEP grant approved \$270,000 for metering. The Residential Facility Quality of Life Improvements in Residential G-Wing are complete and now planning for improvements to F-Wing in early 2022. The WiFi upgrades are 99% complete throughout the Residential Facility. Residential Office flooring abatement and replacement to be completed by December 21, 2021. Three pavilions (13' x 15') are on order for placement at the East and West Residential wings and one possibly at the HCC in the spring of 2022. The DVA has secured a contract for Residential Facility window restoration for Spring 2022. The other projects that will need to be addressed will be roof replacement for the Healthcare Center, roof repairs for buildings 1, 2, and Levitow Lane.

Trustee Barry inquired as to the status of moving the Cemetery and Memorial Services office to the Veterans Cemetery in Middletown. Mr. Danao explained that the move is on hold due to significant IT challenges. Trustee Barry asked whether the DVA has plans to address the poor condition of COL Gates cemetery, particularly the roads and the lack of a sign. Mr. Danao responded that the DVA does not have the operational funds to make the road repairs and will look to obtain bonding funds from the state as part of a larger repair and improvement plan for the cemetery. Trustee Cruz mentioned that there may be an opportunity to have the National Guard or Army Reserve (of which he is a member) make some of the repairs at the Cemetery. Discussion ensued between Mr. Danao, Chair Nelligan and Commissioner Saadi regarding the process for such an approach concluding with Chair Nelligan tasking Trustee Cruz with providing the information for making such a request to Mr. Danao and Commissioner Saadi.

D. Cemetery Property Acquisition

Commissioner Saadi reported that discussions with St. Mary's Parish remain stalled (DVA offer of \$350,000 for the 13.6 acres is far from the \$1 million sought by the parish) and that the private owners of other abutting property are not interested in selling their property to the state. Commissioner Saadi provided a detailed explanation as to discussions between the DVA and DAS Property Division as to

next steps which include having additional appraisals (details not included in these minutes as the information is confidential and exempt from FOIA as it involves strategy related to property acquisition) Acquisition of other CVH and private lots abutting cemetery or contiguous with CVH property totaling 9 acres are being explored.

E. Wreath Across America

Chairman Nelligan asked Commissioner Saadi and Trustee Vogt to update the board on Wreaths Across America. Commissioner Saadi reported that approximately 12,000 wreaths had been sponsored with about 5000 sold through the Board of Trustees page. Commissioner Saadi and Tammy Marzik provided an explanation of the program for the December 18th events which will include Civil Air Patrol cadets providing the color guard and the speaking program will include CAP CT Wing Commander Matt Valleau and Goldstar Mom Lessa Philippon. Trustee Vogt reported that the number of wreaths sponsored exceeded our original goal of 9,000 wreaths. She thanked the Trustees for their support and highlighted by name some of the major sponsors including a CT Girl Scout who raised \$1,500 to sponsor 100 wreaths. The Commissioner explained that proceeds from the wreaths sponsored through the Board's page will be deposited in the Perpetual Care Fund for the State Veterans Cemetery. Commissioner Saadi expressed sincere thanks to Trustee Vogt for her months of work on this effort and for making it a success beyond initial expectations.

II. New Business

A. Staffing updates:

Commissioner Saadi informed the Board that Willis Ballard, Physical Plant Engineer left the DVA in September, that Ryan McKenna, Office of Advocacy & Assistance (OA&A) Manager left the DVA in November and that an OA&A Veteran Services Officer (VSO) from the 2nd District left the DVA the first week of December. He also reported that Darlene Deschaine, his Executive Secretary, would be leaving the DVA at the end of the month. Commissioner Saadi explained that Tammy Marzik is the Acting Manager of OA&A and that while it is difficult to lose experienced staff, that there are many qualified candidates applying to the DVA and that he would use the opportunity to realign and restructure sections of the DVA including expanding the number of VSOs in OA&A to better service Veterans across the State.

B. Program Fee:

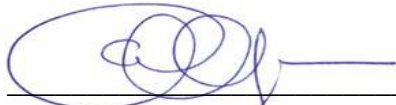
Trustee Barry asked that this item be added to the agenda without objection the item was added. Trustee Barry reported that after the Board approved the proposal to reduce the Residential Program Fee from 30% of income to 25% of Income the Program Fee Subcommittee continues to review income levels of Veteran Residents with a focus on those with little or no income. Trustee Barry explained that the committee identified approximately nine Veterans with income of \$500 or less and that the committee recommends waiving the Program Fee for any Veterans with a monthly income of \$500 or less. Discussion ensued regarding the efforts of DVA to assist Veteran Residents with filing for Social Security and Veteran benefits for a myriad of other programs and services that even Veterans with little or no income receive including personal hygiene, clothing and other items from the DVA through the donations program. The Commissioner expressed his support for the proposal and the board unanimously voted to

eliminate the Program Fee for Veterans with \$500 or less of monthly income beginning in January (February Bill).

III. Closing

There being no further business, Chairman Nelligan entertained a motion to adjourn. Per the scheduled dates set by the Board the next meeting is scheduled for March 9th at 3:30, venue to be determined. Motion to adjourn was made and passed unanimously at 5:08 PM.

Respectfully Submitted:



Patrick Nelligan, Chair
DVA Board of Trustees

Date 7 DEC 2022