



**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