



**Department of Veterans Affairs
State of Connecticut**

**Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes
June 9, 2021**

(Minutes subject to review at next Board Meeting)

I. Convene Meeting:

The Meeting (conducted via Teams meeting platform and in person) was called to order by Commissioner Saadi through Chairman Nelligan at 3:32 PM.

In attendance: John Banks, Paul Barry, Richard Benson, Phil Cacciola, Richard Dziekan, Peter Galgano, Steven Harris, Frederick Leaf, Patrick Nelligan, Sharad Samy, Heather Sandler, Kjell Tollefsen, Sherri Vogt and Dawn Works-Dennis.

Absent: Juan Cruz and Alyssa Kelleher

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

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

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

Commissioner Saadi spoke about recent events including partnering with the Federal VA for a COVID-19 vaccination clinic for Veterans, their spouses and caregivers on April 11th and a ribbon cutting ceremony on April 21st with Governor Ned Lamont marking the completion of two major safety and quality of life improvement projects on campus. Nicky Valluzzo, Jr. of Nicky's Haircutters in Bethel, CT has been volunteering at the DVA Healthcare Center providing much needed free haircuts to Veteran Patients who have been unable to get haircuts due to pandemic restrictions. On May 13th the Department of Veterans Affairs hosted a formal ribbon cutting ceremony marking the completion of two major improvement projects to the grounds of the State Veterans Cemetery in Middletown. Commissioner Saadi informed the Board that he, Mr. Danao and Residential Director Nieves were at eleven different Memorial Day events around the State over the Memorial Day Weekend. On Thursday June 3rd, the Connecticut Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) hosted a ceremony at our Rocky Hill Campus with the Consul General Ambassador Won-sam Chang of the Republic of Korea during which he presented thousands of face masks and hand sanitizers to be distributed among Korean War Veterans, their families and Veterans in Connecticut.

The upcoming events include several events that will be held on June 12th, the National Iwo Jima Memorial Open House Day and the DVA Team will be participating in the CVLC Bike Ride to raise funds for Veterans legal support. On June 13th the Commissioner will be participating in the Gold Star Monument Parade and Dedication in Stamford. The CT Veterans Hall of Fame inductees for the class of 2020 will be held on July 29th in the CTNG Armory Drill Shed. September 22nd & September 23rd Stand Down will be held as a two-day virtual informational webinars and September 24th will be held in five locations, Rocky Hill, Bridgeport, Danbury, Niantic and possibly Willimantic area.

II. 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 forty-nine Veteran Residents and Patients having been tested for COVID-19 since March 2020. 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. Ninety-nine percent of Veteran Residents and Patients are fully vaccinated.

Commissioner Saadi reported that the DVA has been conducting regular COVID-19 testing of all direct care and front-line staff since July 2020 and that sixty-four staff members tested COVID-19 positive since the beginning of the pandemic, with all staff having recovered and returned to work consistent with DPH guidelines. Sixty-five percent of DVA staff are vaccinated for COVID-19.

B. Budgeting and Staffing

Chairman Nelligan recognized DVA Fiscal Director Briana Mitchell for an update on the budget and staffing trends. She reported that the DVA has a budget of 23.5 million dollars which is flat funding based on the current bi-annual budget. Ms. Mitchell reported that the DVA billing departments submitted an invoice for receipt of the one-time emergency payment to State Veterans Homes (SVHs) for COVID-19 response (CARES act) and an invoice for one-time payment to existing State Extended Care Facilities for Veterans for operational needs for SVHs, (ARP act). CARES act funding was used for COVID-19 related funds such as overtime, personal protective equipment and upgrades to maintenance and food services supplies & equipment. Ms. Mitchell reported that the DVA will finish the fiscal year with a balanced budget. She also reported that OPM released FY21 holdbacks and rescissions to Other Expenses (OE) to assist the DVA with addressing the projected insolvency of the IGW (Institutional General Welfare Fund). The Fiscal department is performing an in-depth review of all DVA appropriations and expenditures to ensure responsible spending and effective fiscal oversight.

Chairman Nelligan asked Ms. Mitchell to update the board on the IGW. Ms. Mitchell reported that a total of \$796,000 of expenditures was cut from or shifted out of the IGW. This was achieved by ending a \$175,000 consultant contract support to DVA Healthcare Center, \$540,000 of expenses for medical supplies, specialty medical bed rentals and laundering service was reallocated to Other Expenses (OE), \$81,000 of minor varied IGW expenses were shifted to donations. While not yet achieving permanent solvency this fiscal adjustments and savings directed by Commissioner Saadi ensures IGW solvency at least through FY 2023 allowing time to implement additional changes to achieve permanent solvency.

C. Projects Report

Projects and Operations Director Joe Danao provided a DVA projects began his remarks by stating that Commissioner Saadi will provide an update regarding State Veteran Cemetery Property Acquisition. Mr. Danao reported that the Rocky Hill campus abatement of building 2 Canteen is complete while Build 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. 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. The DVA Auditorium functional and safety upgrades are in the planning stage while the old fixed chairs have been removed. Mr. Danao also reported that Residential Facility Quality of Life Improvements are proceeding including the planning for another residential Wing to be upgraded, WiFi expansion and upgrades is a work in progress and general repairs and painting is ongoing in the Residential Facility.

D. Cemetery Property Acquisition

Commissioner Saadi reported that while discussion with St. Mary's Parish were stalled the broker has reached out to explain that the property is still available however, the DVA offer of \$350,000 for the 13.6 acres is far from the \$1 million sought by the church. Commissioner Saadi then displayed a map of potential available properties, both state owned and privately owned which he explained he is pursuing. The Commissioner stated that his approach is to go after multiple properties and not focus on the Church property. He also emphasized that the \$1 million asked by the church is unreasonable. Commissioner Saadi stated that he is in contact with CVH regarding parcels on Bow Lane and one abutting the cemetery known as Holmes Drive Ext. Commissioner Saadi will update the Lt Governor Susan Bysiewicz who is in full support of the DVA acquiring additional property for the Cemetery.

III. New Business

A. Legislative Update

Commissioner reported on legislation that will be moving forward and which he testified in favor of before the General Assembly including providing state based benefits for certain Veterans with an Other Than Honorable (OTH) discharge characterization (HB5592) which will create the DVA Qualified Condition Review Board. He reported the passage of a bill to providing certain state Veteran recognitions to members of the Hmong Laotian Special Guerilla Units. The recognitions are the CT Wartime Service Medal, Veteran designation on Driver's License and License plate. The Commissioner also testified in favor of legislation which would establish a task force to study updating the Veterans property tax relief laws which passed the house and was pending in the Senate. The Commissioner explained that a bill which directed federal reimbursements for DAV prescription drug purchases to go to the IGW would not move forward this year but would be addressed in the 2022 session.

Commissioner Saadi reported on additional legislation making it easier for military families to enroll their children in school when they move as a result of military orders as well as establish a Purple Star School Program; and a bill requiring the DECD in consultation with the Commissioner of Veterans Affairs to establish a Veterans tourism trail. The Commissioner explained that the DVA does not have the personnel or subject matter experts to accomplish this unfunded mandate and that he would appoint a working group of Veterans, historians, civic leaders and members of the BOT to work with towns, historical societies and other groups to identify battlefields, Veterans Cemeteries, Veterans Monuments

and other related sites for potential inclusion as part of the trail. He explained that this will be a highly involved effort with conflicting ideas of what should and should not be included as part of the trail.

B. Program Fee Reduction Proposal

Commissioner Saadi reported that the current Residential Program Fee is set at 30% of income with deductions for a variety of expenses including for child support and education. Amendments to the current policy have been reviewed by the BOT over the past several years with the BOT deciding to maintain the policy until such time as the Semi-Private Living Program (SPLP) was expanded to the majority of the Residential Facility. As of May 2021, four out of six operational Residential Facility wings have been upgraded to the SPLP with the remaining wings schedule for completion by January 2022.

The Commissioner's proposal the appointment of a BOT Committee to review the following recommendations: reduce the Program Fee from 30% to 25% of income; exempt from the Program Fee Veteran with \$500 or less of monthly income; effective date of any change to be October 1, 2021, (after September BOT meeting) which will be reflected in November Program Fee statement as DVA invoices in subsequent month.

C. Wreaths Across America Ceremony Planning for December 2021

Trustee Vogt reported that 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. Trustee Vogt has set up a website regarding Wreaths Across America as well as a flyer to be handed out. The goal for selling of the wreaths this year is 13,000 total by all parties. The cost of the wreaths will be fifteen dollars each of which five dollars will return to the CT DVA Cemetery Perpetual Care Fund. All money goes directly to Wreaths Across America if purchased through website. Members of the board can accept cash or check that is sent to WAA in Maine. Trustee Vogt asks the board to please try to sell 200 wreaths via the flyer, website, FaceBook page and networking. Please also consider reaching out to all organizations and businesses such as VFW; American Legion; Elks; Rotary; Lions; BSA; Girl Scouts; Police; Fire Departments; Religious groups: church, synagogues, mosques, temples; Chamber of Commerce; Senior Centers and town libraries. A kickoff meeting will be held in June and bi-weekly meetings will start in mid-September. The stakeholders can discuss fund raising events.

IV. Closing

Chairman Nelligan had to excuse himself to attend to work matters, Vice Chair Dennis-Works was present to proceed for the remainder of the meeting.

Per the scheduled dates set by the Board the next meeting is scheduled for September 8th at 3:30, venue to be determined. Motion to adjourn was made and passed unanimously at 5:17 PM.

Respectfully Submitted:



Patrick Nelligan, Chair
DVA Board of Trustees

Date June 24, 2021