



**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 5<sup>th</sup> DVA hosted the 1<sup>st</sup> Annual Women Veteran Health & Wellness brunch attended by more

than 60 women veterans with providers such as dietitians, 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 6<sup>th</sup> 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 12<sup>th</sup> 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 17<sup>th</sup>.

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 providing 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.

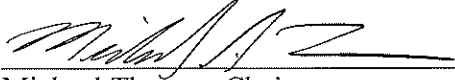
Commissioner Saadi reported that during his quasi-leave of absence for six months of Active Military Duty he has been keeping in touch with senior through frequent conference calls, as well as holding calls with Board leadership, legislators and others related to DVA operations. He is also using military 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