

Connecticut Department of Veterans Affairs



Board of Trustees Annual Report for 2022

Patrick Nelligan
Board Chairperson

Thomas J. Saadi
Commissioner

February 15, 2023



“Serving Those Who Served”



April 25, 2023

Dear Governor Lamont and Members of the Veterans & Military 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 the DVA to 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 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.

I acknowledge the late submission of this report due to my currently serving on active duty in the U.S. Army and due to DVA Commissioner Thomas J. Saadi suffering a serious back injury in January preventing us from being able to coordinate until recently a detailed review of the status of DVA projects and updates to programs and services necessary to complete this report.

The Board fulfilled its duties during 2022 through active engagement in the oversight of DVA operations, programmatic and policy updates at the DVA with in person meetings, Campus tours and briefings by Commissioner Saadi and senior staff members. The Board worked closely with Commissioner Saadi and DVA leadership to ensure completion of renovations of all Residential Facility rooms for Veterans and to reduce the Residential Monthly Program Fee by nearly 20%. This fee, applied only beginning the 5th month of a Veteran's residency, is at its lowest level in seven years. The Board appointed a committee at the request of Commissioner Saadi to review future reductions of the Program fee. The Board also supported the DVA's efforts to renovate the Campus Auditorium which was dedicated in November 2022 as the CT Gold Star Families Memorial Auditorium. The Board continues to work with the DVA to address the need for additional land at the State Veterans Cemetery in Middletown which will be expected to run out of burial space within four years. The Board's collaboration with the DVA in hosting the annual Wreaths Across America at the State Veterans Cemetery is in its second year and was a great success resulting in raising \$20,000 for the DVA's Cemetery Perpetual Care fund.

Collaboration and communication between the Board and Commissioner Saadi supports a dynamic approach to addressing issues and overcoming challenges with new approaches that improve the delivery of programs and services to Veterans. It is an honor to lead the Board of Trustees in service to Veterans across the State of Connecticut.

Respectfully Submitted,

Patrick Nelligan
Chairperson

Veteran, United States Army

DVA Board of Trustees Annual Report for 2022

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 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. Residential and Healthcare programs admission, discharge and transfer policies.
- b. Residential Fee schedule for programs, services and benefits.
- c. Participation of eligible family members in programs or services.

Throughout 2022 the Board has fulfilled its statutory mission through active engagement with the DVA leadership and oversight of DVA operations, policies and programs. This past year is not unique but continued the ongoing highly collaborative process consistent with Commissioner Thomas J. Saadi's philosophy of empowerment through transparency and bilateral engagement with the Board related to the full spectrum of DVA programs and operations. This is underscored by regular communications between Board meetings by Commissioner Saadi and DVA staff with the Board on myriad issues across the full spectrum of DVA services.

At the Board's regular quarterly meetings Commissioner Saadi and DVA Senior Staff provided comprehensive and detailed PowerPoint briefing and supporting documentary updates regarding the 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 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 . . .)
- (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 rebuilding Office of Advocacy and Assistance staffing statewide.

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 worked with the DVA to implement major program and policy updates during 2022 including in the Residential Program. These include the completion of the expansion of the Semi-Private Living Program to the entire Residential Facility, a process which began with Board approval in 2019. The DVA implemented the Board's approval of recommended updates to the Program Fee policy reducing the Program Fee from 30% to 25% of adjusted income and also exempting Veterans with a monthly income of \$500 or less from the Program Fee. The Board has reappointed a new Program Fee Subcommittee to review possible future changes as the request of Commissioner Saadi to further reduce the Program Fee if fiscally feasible.

In 2022 Board members were more actively involved than in the previous 4 years with the DVA Stand Down, an annual event led by the DVA Residential Program providing Connecticut Veterans and Service Members (including National Guard and Reserve component personnel) with "one stop" access to a broad range of programs and services offered by State and Federal agencies, Veterans Organizations and Community Based Non-profits. Through 2019 Stand Down was held only at the DVA Rocky Hill Campus on a single day, however in 2020 due to Pandemic restrictions on large group activities Commissioner Saadi modified Stand Down to a hybrid multiday format with the first day being online informational sessions and webinars and the second day the DVA coordinated government agencies and community based non-profits in providing Veteran programs, benefits and services information and distribution of personal need items at four regional locations at the DVA Rocky Hill Campus and in Danbury, Bridgeport and Norwich with about 700 Veterans attending. In 2021 the DVA continued the hybrid Stand Down format and expanded the in person regional locations to include a fifth site at Quinebaug Community College with about 900 Veterans attending.

In 2022 the DVA held its annual Stand Down on Friday, September 23rd at the main Campus in Rocky Hill and four sites across Connecticut in Bristol, Bridgeport, Danbury and Norwich providing one stop access for Veterans, Active Duty, National Guard and Reserve personnel to a broad variety of and state, federal, local agencies, Veterans Service Organizations and non-profit programs, services and benefits. This included free DMV and CBA legal services at each location and direct access to CT Judicial Branch court services at the Rocky Hill Campus. Providers also distributed hundreds personal need items such as winter clothing, personal hygiene items, and snacks while also conducting health screenings and administering hundreds of vaccines. Approximately 1100 Veterans and military personnel attended Stand Down 2022, an increase of 19% over 2021.

The multi-site approach to Stand Down implemented by Commissioner Saadi has been a great success with more Veterans and service members from across the State able to more easily access the range of programs, benefits and services especially in high population urban areas.

b. Implementation of Prior Recommendations:

There were four major recommendations of the Board in its report issued in 2022 and the DVA has successfully achieved each as follows:

1. **Board Recommendation:** The DVA should develop a comprehensive marketing plan with a focus on expanding outreach and facilitating greater access to information as to the agencies programs and services. This may be accomplished by re-establishing the position of Communications Director who can work with Directors of Residential and Healthcare programs to develop marketing materials, including virtual tours of the Residential and Healthcare facilities. The DVA should encourage State and Federal Legislators and Veteran Service Organizations to include DVA program and services information in communications to constituents, organization members and supporters.

DVA Action: The DVA re-established the position of Communications Director in 2022 promoting the DVA Manager of Community Advocacy to fill that position along with other related responsibilities. Throughout 2022, the DVA updated its website and many programs and services forms to make them more user friendly and easier to process. Commissioner Saadi actively engaged with many state Legislators and Congressional Offices to promote Veteran services offered by the DVA and other state agencies at veteran recognition ceremonies, community events and benefit fairs. This included the DVA distributing thousands of state Veteran benefit brochures at no less than forty events statewide.

2. **Board Recommendation:** Continue quality of life, functional and aesthetic improvements to the DVA Residential Facility including the repair and painting of Residential Wings windows, improve indoor and outdoor recreational areas including the construction of pavilions with lighting and renovate or replace existing Veterans Auto-shop garage.

DVA Action: the DVA completed the quality of life renovations and improvements to all the Veterans' rooms in the residential facility in 2022, this is in addition to the scraping, repairs and repainting of all windows in the Residential Facility. Improvements were made to indoor recreational areas including the establishment of a creative arts work space room, installing new computers in the Veteran computer and game room and ongoing renovations to the Residential Facility library. The DVA also installed three new 16 by 20 foot outdoor pavilions with two at the Residential Facility and one at the Healthcare Center, made improvements to the Veteran greenhouse and is engaged in ongoing upgrades to lighting around the campus. The DVA has completed upgrades to the Veterans auto shop garage which includes new heating and AC systems, new roofing, upgraded IT platform, painting of the entire garage with specialized epoxy and an array of new equipment including car and motorcycle lifts, welders and related safety equipment.

3. **Board Recommendation:** The Board is concerned with the stagnation of recreational programming which has a heavy reliance on community based civic and Veteran organizations for support. While such support does provide reasonable recreational opportunities the DVA staff must do better to develop new and dynamic recreational programming on and off campus with a dedicated full time recreational coordinator. Unfortunately Board members have heard from Residential Veterans that the current recreational coordinator lacks motivation and a vision for addressing this important aspect

of the overall care plan for Veterans. The DVA may consider engaging a third party contractor with expertise in recreational programing to initiate a new approach and train DVA staff to continue after the end of the contract period.

DVA Action: Rather than engaging a third party contractor the Commissioner Saadi added a new fulltime Residential Recreational staff person and required the Residential Director to have recreational staff develop and follow a detailed recreation events plan. This has resulted in the expansion of on and off campus recreational events prompting very positive feedback from Veteran Residents.

4. **Board Recommendation:** The DVA should expand the Wreaths Across America Program/outreach to ensure that in 2022 there are sufficient wreaths to cover Colonel Gates Cemetery in Rocky Hill which is reserved for Veterans who pass while in the DVA Residential or Healthcare programs.

DVA Action: In collaboration with the Board the DVA has been working to provide sufficient wreaths to cover COL Gates Cemetery. It must be noted that as the wreaths are purchased through donations made to the Wreaths Across America program the Board and the DVA cannot control the number purchased. However, through greater outreach and coordination with other community based Veteran support groups the number of wreaths purchases has been on the increase.

c. New Recommendations:

1. The DVA should continue to engage in quality of life, functional and aesthetic improvements to the DVA Residential Facility to include the construction of a large pavilion in the center quad area which would allow for greater use of this space by Veteran Residents for outdoor events, planned and informal. Such a pavilion would also be of use for DVA ceremonies and staff events as well as provide a great setting for community based Veterans Organizations to hold events pursuant to the provisions of the DVA Facility Use Policy.
2. Work with the Board Program Fee Subcommittee to determine whether the Program Fee may be reduced or whether all Veterans should have a portion of their income exempt rather than exempting all Veterans with income under \$550 from paying the Program Fee.
3. Conduct a feasibility review of whether the Patriots Landing family housing program may be expanded utilizing existing structures on the DVA main Campus. The need for temporary housing for Veterans with a spouse and/or dependent children is increasing and the current program size, while providing excellent support to Veteran families, is not sufficient to address the need of the Veteran community.

II. Healthcare Center

a. Board Activities

The Board remained engaged throughout 2022, in monitoring the DVA response to the COVID-19 pandemic and transition to regularized operations in the Sgt, John Levitow Healthcare

Center (HCC) through detailed quarterly briefings and written reports, weekly Commissioner COVID-19 updates and telephonic briefings as needed.

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. 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.

DVA Action: Throughout 2021 the DVA utilized monthly emails, social media and online virtual town hall meetings to communicate information about the DVA programs and services including long-term skilled nursing care at the DVA Healthcare Center. However, as with Residential Services a comprehensive marketing plan is needed with a focus on expanding outreach and facilitating greater access to information as to the DVA's programs and services.

2. **Board Recommendation:** 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 Medicare 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.

DVA Action: In 2021 the DVA implemented operational and policy updates to facilitate admissions to the HCC including coordination between HCC and DVA Fiscal staff in tracking the status of Medicare applications with the Department of Social Services (DSS) and engaging with the family or party assisting the Veteran to facilitate completing the application process. Also, until 2021 the DVA would not approve an admission to the HCC unless the Veteran had a verified payor source (e.g. Medicare, Private Pay or 70% or payment covered by VA for 70% or greater Service Connected Disabled Veteran). Commissioner Saadi issue a directive that Medicare applicants may be admitted to the HCC even while their application is pending with DSS as once approved Medicare will provide up to 90 days retroactive payment. This approach has allowed the HCC to admit several Veterans who otherwise would have been denied or delayed admission.

3. **Board Recommendation:** Continue the phasing out of smoking by Veteran Patients with a goal of making the HCC smoke free by July 1, 2022.

DVA Action: The DVA HCC continues to reduce smoking by its Veteran Patients through education, cessation programs and reducing the number of smoking times permitted at the HCC from a high of six times per day two now twice per day. This has resulted in a dramatic reduction in smoking by Veteran Patients. The Commissioner reports that the HCC will not be able to eliminate smoking by July 1, 2022, however the DVA will continue its multifaceted approach to reducing smoking by Veterans.

c. New Recommendations

1. The existing HCC 300 Kilowatt emergency generator, while regulatory complaint at time of installation in 2008, is insufficient to fully power the HCC during a loss of public utility power. This deficiency is particularly problematic during warm weather as the 300 Kilowatt generator cannot power the HCC HVAC chiller resulting in elevated temperatures. This occurred in 2021 in the aftermath of storm Isaias requiring the DVA to request an emergency Generator from Eversource to fully power the HCC.

Remains an outstanding project for which the DVA will seek bonding match for Federal VA grant

2. The DVA should develop a comprehensive marketing plan with a focus on expanding outreach and facilitating greater access to information as to the agency's programs and services. This may be accomplished by re-establishing the position of Communications Director who can work with Directors of Residential and Healthcare programs to develop marketing materials, including virtual tours of the Residential and Healthcare facilities. The DVA should encourage State and Federal Legislators and Veteran Service Organizations to include DVA program and services information in communications to constituents, organization members and supporters.

Comm dir created, more tours conducted and greater outreach to Veterans in community based Skilled nursing Facilities include at least one which is closing and transferring out all patients.

3. After the DVA completed the transition of the HCC from a chronic disease hospital to a licensed skilled nursing facility Board members inquired as to whether the HCC could offer short term rehabilitative services covered by Medicaid. In response the HCC and DVA Fiscal Directors explained that the DVA did not have the structure or staff to implement such a program. The Board recommends that the DVA hire a consultant to assist the HCC with establishing a short term rehabilitative services program and the related structure for billing Medicaid.

Work in progress

III. Office of Advocacy and Assistance

a. Board activities

The Office of Advocacy and Assistance (OA&A) employs Veteran Service Officers (VSO), all combat deployed Veterans, who provide representation to Veterans and eligible dependents in their claims for Federal pensions and benefits and provide assistance in filing for State Veterans programs and benefits. Additionally OA&A is responsible for the following: (1) determining eligibility for the Veteran flag on the state driver's license or identification card; (2) certifying Veteran Owned Micro Businesses for state contract bidding; (3) administering the Municipal Veterans Representative Program; (4) determining Veteran eligibility for pretrial diversionary programs; and (5) issuance of the CT Wartime Service Medal. Two new responsibilities were

added in 2021 requiring OA&A to provide administrative support to the Eligibility Qualifying Review Board and to train and support the Department of Motor Vehicles in the administration of the new Veteran Conflict Specific license plate program. The Board's activities related to OA&A in 2021 focused on outreach to Veterans and Veteran Service Organizations across the State as the pandemic continues to negatively impact O&A's ability to connect in person with Veterans across the State. To address this challenge the Board supported OA&A's rollout of virtual monthly Town Hall meetings and increased electronic outreach through email and social media. Despite the outreach limitations OA&A VSOs continue active representation and advocacy for Veterans and eligible dependents via phone, email and virtual meetings and a steady increasing in person meetings and office hours. The DVA has also 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 including mental health services.

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:** 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.

DVA Action: Throughout the latter half of 2021 OA&A steady increased in person engagement with Veterans around Connecticut including attending Veteran Coffeehouses, visiting Nursing homes, participating in Legislative and Veteran Service Organization benefit panels and presentations and significantly involved in the planning, execution and participation in Veterans Stand Down 2021.

c. Recommendations

1. Commissioner Saadi should task the new OA&A manger with conducting a review of OA&A operations with the goal of developing a realignment plan adjusting VSO coverage to reflect the Veteran population concentrations in Connecticut which are not balanced as between the Congressional districts to which VSOs are currently assigned. The plan should include the continuation of Commissioner Saadi's effort to increase the number of VSOs which was until recently at a historic low.

DONE!

2. OA&A must increase outreach efforts pursuant to a standardized annual plan which ensures that: (1) VSOs are engaged with community based Veterans; (2) coordination with state and federal agencies/providers and non-profits to disseminate information to Veterans regarding DVA programs and services; (3) conduct regular Veteran benefits workshops in

person and online in conjunction with State and Federal legislators leveraging their ability to communicate directly with constituents.

Done!

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.

The Board sub-committee on Cemetery issues has been actively engaged with DVA throughout 2021 in developing solutions to address concerns relating to sustaining maintenance and upkeep of the Cemetery and the need to increase long-term burial/internment capacity at the State Veterans Cemetery in Middletown through property acquisition. These and other issues were identified in the Veterans Cemetery Master Plan report commissioned by the DVA and issued in February 2019. The State Veterans Cemetery will likely reach internment capacity in approximately seven years. In response the DVA has been actively attempting to secure additional abutting property from both public agency and private property owners however, the largest and most advantageous abutting property is owned by Saint Mary's Parish in Middletown and have rejected the DVA offer of \$350,000 to purchase the property. DAS property division contacted the parish's broker requesting reconsider of their outright rejection and to make a counteroffer. The parish rejected further discussions absent DVA increasing offer arguing that the parish is entertaining offer of \$1 million from private developer. DAS is currently conducting two new appraisals of the property which will be utilized to determine whether the DVA can make a good faith offer in excess of \$350,000. The DVA is also attempting to acquire abutting property owned by the Department of Mental Health and Addition Services (DMHAS). Acquisition of other DMHAS and private lots abutting cemetery or contiguous with DMHAS property totaling 9 acres is being explored.

b. Implementation of Prior Recommendations:

There were three major recommendations of the Board in its report issued in 2020 which the DVA has addressed as follows:

1. **Board Recommendation:** The DVA should continue actively searching for abutting property (public and private) for expansion of the 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 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: See narrative in section 'IV. a.' hereinabove.

2. **Board Recommendation:** 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.

DVA Action: In late 2020 Commissioner Saadi issued a directive to prohibiting any such fundraising including that conducted by Civil Air Patrol (CAP) Connecticut Wing in the sale of wreaths as part of the Wreaths Across America program. In response senior leadership of CAP sold the wreaths at cost avoiding the issue of raising money through an event at the Veterans Cemetery. In 2021 new CAP leadership worked closely with the DVA to transfer operational responsibility for the Wreaths Across America program to the DVA and the Board took on the responsibility of administering the sale of wreaths with proceeds deposited in the new Cemetery Perpetual Care and Maintenance trust fund. The 2021 Wreaths Across America program was a great success with more than 12,000 wreaths placed by hundreds of volunteers at the State Veterans Cemetery in Middletown.

3. **Board Recommendation:** The DVA should initiate the planning process for the establishing of an outdoor committal shelter at the Veterans Cemetery.

DVA Action: The DVA initiated the planning process which included reviewing options for constructing a permanent structure at an estimated cost of between \$250,000 to \$350,000. However, due to the need to maximize existing Cemetery property for internment purposes the DVA suspended the planning process pending determination of what property the DVA is likely to acquire for Cemetery expansion which directly impacts the size and location of a committal shelter.

c. Recommendations

1. The DVA should continue with a previously 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 will need to address IT support services which are currently inadequate in the existing Cemetery Administrative building.
2. The DVA should continue actively searching for abutting property (public and private) for expansion of the Veterans Cemetery. The recommended course of action remains the acquisition of land adjacent to the existing cemetery which will avoid the need for staff to maintain an additional cemetery.
3. In light of the planning concerns with regard to constructing a permanent Committal shelter at this time the DVA should investigate options for a temporary shelter, if such exists, which can be relocated as needed. The planning process for the establishing a permanent outdoor committal shelter should proceed as soon as practicable based on the status of Cemetery property acquisition.

V. General Recommendations

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

1. **Board Recommendation:** 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.

DVA Action: In August 2021 the DVA completed Phase I of the DVA Auditorium safety and functional improvement plan. This first phase included the removal of outdated and damaged fixed seating, replacing of outdated lighting, stretching and securing of carpeting, repair and refinishing of hardwood flooring, replacing worn curtains that presented a fire hazard with new fire-retardant curtains and replaced the damaged screen and stage back wall with a new wall that functions as a screen. Phase II is planned for 2022 and will include ADA upgrades to the Auditorium lavatory and replacing of the stage curtains which are damaged and no-longer fire retardant. The removal of the fixed seating and improved lighting created a safer and more functional space that is now regularly used for DVA events, briefing visiting groups, recognition and memorial ceremonies and staff training sessions. It is also host to many recreational activities including concerts, holiday parties, bingo and other activities for Veterans. In 2021 several state and federal agencies used the auditorium for training sessions and graduation ceremonies

3. **Board Recommendation:** 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.

DVA Action: The DVA is proceeding with an Energy Efficiency Program which will, among other things, help to reduce the DVA's more than \$1,000,000 in yearly utility costs. The DVA is in Phase II of the project which includes a \$270,000 DEEP Grant for sub-metering of buildings. The DVA is currently conducting a survey of the nearly 1,500 steam traps on campus. The cost of this study is 50% reimbursable by the DVA's utility company. The study will allow DVA to apply for another energy efficiency grant to replace all identified failed steam traps which will result in immediate savings of water and gas. The DVA is also reviewing options for Solar Panels on the campus with CT Greenbank that has approved DVA for next steps with costs and project timeline to be set in 2022. The DVA also plans to update lighting controls, refrigeration in the main kitchen, and continue transition to LED and solar lighting as appropriate.

4. **Board Recommendation:** 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.

DVA Action: In 2021 the DVA engaged several Veteran Service Organizations and Community based non-profits in discussions regarding locating to the newly renovated

building 50 on the Campus with other Veteran Service Organizations with the goal of making the Campus a one stop shop hub for Veterans. At least three such organizations are in the process of negotiating lease terms with DAS for space at the DVA Campus. These types of partnerships, including that with Easterseals Veterans Rally Point, have provided for expanded services to DVA Veterans and community-based Veterans with no additional cost to the State.

New General Recommendations

1. The DVA and Board should build on the success of the 2021 Wreaths Across America program to surpass last year's wreath sales with the goal of being able to being able to cover both the State Veterans Cemetery in Middletown and the Col Gates DVA Cemetery in Rocky Hill.
2. The DVA should work with the BOT to develop and "Code of Conduct" for Board members which sets forth rules, duties and responsibilities of Board members.

VI. Board Minutes

Attached hereto are the minutes from each Board's meeting during 2022, 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 2022