



**Department of Veterans Affairs
State of Connecticut**

**Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes
December 2, 2020**

(Minutes subject to review at next Board Meeting)

I. Convene Meeting:

The Meeting (conducted via Teams meeting platform) was called to order by Co-Chairman Nelligan at 3:12 PM.

In attendance: John Banks, Paul Barry, Richard Benson, Juan Cruz, Peter Galgano, Steven Harris, Frederick Leaf, Patrick Nelligan, Sharad Samy, Heather Sandler, Michael Thomas (joined the meeting late due to work obligations), Dawn Works-Dennis.

Absent: Phil Cacciola, Richard Dziekan, Alyssa Kelleher, Mark Spranzo, Kjell Tollefsen, Sherri Vogt.

In attendance from the DVA: Commissioner Thomas Saadi, Joseph Danao, Darlene Deschaine, Tammy Marzik, Briana Mitchell, Leslie Nieves, and Ryan McKenna. In attendance as an observer from Connecticut House Republicans, Mr. Andrew Droney.

Vice-Chair Nelligan, entertained a motion to approve the minutes of the previous meeting. Motion made by Trustee Harris and seconded by Trustee Sandler. Motion passed unanimously without any corrections or edits to the minutes.

Vice-Chairman Nelligan asked for Commissioner Thomas Saadi to brief on DVA achievements and events.

Commissioner Saadi spoke briefly about the events that took place this past quarter. Stand Down was a two-day event, with virtual information sessions on the first day and personal needs items were distributed and Veteran services available at four regional locations on the second day. On October 22nd a DVA Residential Town Hall Meeting was held to discuss the current pandemic and other topics, it was in the DVA auditorium following physical distance protocols and wearing of masks. November 7th the Commissioner participated in the Coventry Patriots Day 4 Mile Race, the proceeds given to various Veteran Organization including DVA Veterans Outreach & Support Services. On Veterans Day the Commissioner participated in ceremonies at Regional Hospice in Danbury, at Anthology of Farmington, Town of Rocky Hill and at the State Veterans Cemetery in Middletown. Commissioner Saadi reported that Immaculate High School in Danbury donated \$1,200 as did S&P Oyster House in Mystic to assist with DVA Veteran outreach.

The upcoming events include DVA OA&A Virtual Town Hall on December 9th, Wreaths Across America Convoy on December 17th, Wreaths Across America event on December 19th at State Veterans Cemetery and Colonel Gates Cemetery. The CT Veterans Hall of Fame inductees has been postponed to spring of 2021, for the class of 2020.

II. Old/Ongoing Business

A. COVID-19 Response & Recovery

Commissioner Saadi reported DVA point in time testing and positivity data with two hundred and thirty-seven Veteran Residents and Patients having been tested for COVID-19. Thirty-one testing positive, the majority occurred early in the pandemic. Twenty-four recovered from the virus and two are currently in the Residential Isolation Unit and two are currently in the Healthcare Isolation Unit. One Veteran Resident and two Veteran Patients passed away in the spring from COVID-19 complications. The Commissioner went on to report that COVID-19 testing has been taking place for all direct care and front-line DVA staff members weekly since early July. Total of 23 staff members tested positive to date. Majority of these positive results, 17, occurred between October 3rd & December 2nd.

Trustee Samy asked about the roll out of the COVID vaccine. Commissioner Saadi reported that the DVA is registered with CMS and DPH for vaccines for the staff and Veteran Residents and Patients. The administration has outlined a timeline for distribution: Phase 1a will include healthcare workers, nursing home residents and medical first responders. Phase 1b will include critical workforce, other congregate settings, adults 65 and up and anyone considered "high-risk" under age 65. Phase 2 will include anyone under 18-years-old, remaining residents over 18-years-old. Distribution may begin later this month.

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. There is a single updated DVA COVID-19 mitigation protocol which contains all of the current COVID-19 mitigation protocols. Command Mitigation Huddle is held Monday, Wednesdays and Fridays; PERSTAT is held every weekday. Commissioner Saadi reported that telework has been extended for the Administrative staff, which follows the protocol of non-essential staff be present at a 50 percent capacity. Commissioner Saadi also reported that the DVA is bringing on an HR Business Partner who will be on campus, Bethanne Watts. She will be reporting directly to DAS due to the centralization.

B. Budgeting and Staffing

Commissioner Saadi recognized newly appointed Fiscal Director Briana Mitchell from DVA's Fiscal Office who gave an update on the budget and staffing trends. She reports that the DVA has a budget of 26.5 million dollars. OPM has asked all agencies to make rescissions to their budgets, DVA has been asked to cut approximately \$198,000 from its personal expenses and \$14,500 from its operating expenses which is in addition to the current \$600,000 holdback of DVA appropriated funds. Ms. Mitchell stated that additional rescissions to DVA's budget would affect the delivery services to CT's veterans. Ms. Mitchell went on to report that the DVA has been able to keep agency warehouse and mailroom employees as essential staff status to ensure uninterrupted service. Staffing and overtime this past quarter were one of the biggest expenditures for COVID related issues.

Trustee Barry asked if the fiscal department could provide the BOT with a rundown of the DVA's appropriations and expenditures as well as a roll up of the IGW for the past ten years. Commissioner Saadi stated that the fiscal department will prepare the report and he will distribute within the next week.

C. Projects Report

Projects and Operations Director Joe Danao provided a general DVA Projects update which include the Cemetery Appearance project, the Cemetery Expansion and the Cemetery Services Master Plan, all of which are completed. On the Rocky Hill Campus, further asbestos abatement projects are waiting for funding and the DVA fire alarm and sprinkler project is complete. Upgrades to the Campus Security System is waiting funding, the DVA Water Improvement Project is in the programming phase, also currently awaiting more funding and the DVA Energy Efficiency Project was awarded a DEEP Grant for \$270,000. Quality of Life Improvements include the D-Wing Renovation which is near completion. A-Wing build out of long-term COVID-19 Isolation wing is also near completion. The next Bond Commission meeting is scheduled for December 11, 2020 and the DVA pending request is \$215,000 for minor capital repairs and emergency repairs. DVA is moving forward with a WiFi upgrade using donations and will not come out of DVA budget. Commissioner Saadi noted that the extension of the semi-private living program will next be in D-Wing the renovation of which has been accomplished without any additional appropriations.

D. Cemetery Property Acquisition

Commissioner Saadi reported on the Cemetery property acquisition including discussions with St. Mary's Parish related to the acquisition of the 13.6 acre parcel. The DVA has received the appraisals and made an offer of \$350,000 which was initially rejected by the parish. The parish real-estate broker then contacted DAS property acquisition asking for the DVA to make another offer to which the response was that the Parish needed to make a good faith counteroffer. No such counteroffer has been received. Commissioner Saadi explained that he will be meeting with DAS property acquisition staff next week to direct them to begin the process of acquisition of the two other parcels identified in the Cemetery Master Plan across Bow Lane from the current Cemetery. One parcel is owned by a CT state agency and the other is privately owned. Commissioner also reported that DVA now owns Cottage 22 and the land around which has been incorporated as part of the Cemetery property. DVA staff has a plan for repairs and improvements to Cottage 22 which was acquired with no cost to the DVA.

III. New Business

A. BOT Wreaths Across America Ceremony at Middletown & COL Gates Cemetery

Commissioner reported that Civil Air Patrol (CAP) has confirmed that they continue to sell wreaths through the Wreaths Across America platform however they are doing so at cost and will not make any profit from the event this year which had been an ongoing concern of many BOT members due to transparency and disclosure issues. Ryan McKenna reported that every grave at the cemetery will have a wreath and the ceremony is planned for December 19th at noon. The wreaths will remain on the graves until approximately the third week of January. The wreaths are to be delivered on December 17th; there will a rally at Stop & Shop in Cromwell in the morning. The convoy will then proceed to CT State Veterans Cemetery to unload palletized wreaths. Staff and volunteers will place a limited amount of wreaths prior to the event due to the 150-person limit on the day of the event. Parking will be within the

cemetery. This year there will be no busses allowed and no vending trucks will be present. There will be a simultaneous event at Gates Cemetery.

IV. Closing

Commissioner Saadi asked the Board to adopt a regular meeting schedule for the next year so it may be posted with the Secretary of State due statutory mandates. Chairman Thomas who joined the meeting at approximately 4:30, suggested that the board meet soon to address next year's schedule and set a date for the next board meeting. Motion to adjourn was made and passed unanimously at 4:36 PM.

Respectfully Submitted:



Michael Thomas, Chair
DVA Board of Trustees

Date 3/25/21