



**Department of Veterans Affairs
State of Connecticut**

**Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes
December 13, 2023**

(Minutes subject to review at next Board Meeting)

I. Convene Meeting:

The Meeting was held in the Commissioner's Conference Room at the Department of Veterans Affairs located at 287 West Street, Rocky Hill, CT.

Trustees in attendance: Richard Adgers, John Banks, Paul Barry, Phil Cacciola, Carlita Cotton, Richard Dzieken, Peter Galgano Jr., Richard Harris, Adele Hodges, Frederick Leaf, John Lawlor, Patrick Nelligan and Sharad Samy,

Absent: Alyssa Kelleher, Heather Sandler and Sherri Vogt.

DVA Staff in attendance: Commissioner Ronald P. Welch, John Carragher, Lori Conchado, Joseph Danao, Lindsay Jesshop, Briana Mitchell, Lesbia Nieves.

Chair, Patrick Nelligan called the meeting to order at 3:27 p.m. with a quorum in place and with the approval of members he entertained a motion to approve the minutes of the previous meeting which were accepted by Trustee Lawlor and seconded by Trustee Hodges. The minutes were passed unanimously without any corrections or edits.

Commissioner Welch provided an overview of Veteran events held throughout the state during the past quarter attended by Commissioner or designees to include several ceremonies honoring Vietnam and Korean War Veterans in conjunction with Lieutenant Governor Bysiewicz, Veteran milestone birthday celebrations, Veteran Coffeehouses, meetings with several Senators to discuss the upcoming legislative session an Unclaimed Remains Ceremony and Hispanic Heritage celebrations. Commissioner Welch participated in several radio interviews and the department's first podcast to provide information on benefits available to our Veterans.

The 2024 Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony has been scheduled for January 25, 2024 beginning at 5:00 p.m. in the DVA's Gold Star Families Memorial Auditorium. Application packages are in the final stage of review with letters to nominators and applicants expected to be out this week. Trustee Lawlor inquired whether any DVA residents were being considered to which Commissioner responded noting we did not receive applications for any residents.

The Assumption of Duties Ceremony for Dr. Becky Rhoads, Executive Director for the VA Connecticut Healthcare System was held at the DVA's Gold Star Memorial Auditorium on November 30th. The DVA is looking forward to collaborating with Dr. Rhoades and staff to support our Veterans and negotiate changes in medical reimbursements that are expected to cost approximately \$180,000 per year.

II. Old/Ongoing Business

A. Residential Programs

Residential Director Lesbia Nieves reported a successful Stand Down event was held on 9/22/23 at five locations throughout the state with over 900 Veterans participating. Other notable events for the quarter include a Hispanic History Month ceremony, Veterans Day Ceremony and a Ribbon Cutting for the newly built Pavilion on campus. Twenty-six Residential Veterans and staff participated in a 3-day trip to Washington DC visiting several locations of interest. The American Auxiliary Christmas shopping party held over four days was made possible by the generous donations and volunteer's time to provide gifts to Veterans. The 102nd Army Band held a Holiday Concert in the DVA Gold Star Families Auditorium with over 125 Veterans, family members and staff in attendance.

B. Healthcare Center

Commissioner provided a brief overview of the Healthcare Center noting an unannounced inspection by the Federal VA of the Residential program and Healthcare Center which resulted in positive feedback reported. DVA staff continues to work on the Corrective Action Plan (CAP) for a prior Federal VA inspection. Eighteen Veterans were presented with a Quilt of Valor during a ceremony held at the Healthcare Center.

C. Fiscal Report

Director of Fiscal Services, Ms. Briana Mitchell presented the DVA is closing out the 2020/21 budget and looking closely at the 2026/27 Biennial budget which is expected to be tight due to increasing operating and FTE costs. The DVA must compile FTE costs for reporting to OPM by March 2024 for the next fiscal year's forecasting. Chair Nelligan asked that the DVA reach out to Trustees if support is needed and suggested a sub-committee be created to review and support this initiative.

D. Deputy Commissioner Report

Deputy Commissioner Danao provide a brief overview of his role in supporting the department in onboarding a new Customer Service manager, support for DVA events and several inspections conducted on campus. The DVA is also expecting an unannounced inspection by the Connecticut Department of Public Health. The current count of Residential Veterans is reported at 111 and 83 at the HCC.

E. Cemetery Property Acquisitions

In response to Trustee Barry's request for an update on the cemetery acquisition, Commissioner reported that he is working with state officials who are diligently attempting to negotiate the purchase of additional land. The DVA is on the Bond Commission's agenda on 12/8 requesting \$3 million for the purchase of land.

F. Office of Advocacy & Assistance

OA&A Manager, John Carragher reported the unit generated approximately \$125 million in benefit payments to our Connecticut Veterans through claims made to the Federal VA by our Veteran Service Officers. The office is expecting to onboard two new staff members: a Veteran Service Supervisor in January and an Office Assistant in February 2024. The department is working on building access for training, resources and outreach opportunities to better support our Veterans. The office is also preparing for a Cemetery Grant Assessment due in August 2024. The department is currently doing all we can to maximize burial space and will need to excavate for crypt placement space for burial of cremains.

G. Office of Community Advocacy

Manager of Community Advocacy, Lindsay Jesshop reported a large number of monetary donations and gift cards were received during this quarter to support our Veterans and the department is working on revisions to our donation policy. Several successful events were held to include our annual Stand Down, Hispanic History Month celebration, Rocky Hill Run, Off Road Jeepers and an Unclaimed Cremains Ceremony laying six Veterans to rest at the Connecticut Veterans Cemetery in Middletown. Upcoming events include the Wreaths Across America Ceremony on December 16th and Hall of Fame ceremony scheduled for January 25, 2024 in the DVA's Gold Star Families Memorial Auditorium.

The office was busy making arrangements for the department's first podcast, meeting with legislators and attending Coffeehouses to build community relationships with Veterans and organizations. Reworking the Volunteer Program and Handbook will be a focus in 2024.

John Carragher reported we will be placing wreaths on all headstones at the Middletown Cemetery and approximately 50% of those at the Gates Cemetery in Rocky Hill for the ceremonies on December 16th.

H. Trustee Suggestions for 2024

Chair Nelligan tabled this item for the next scheduled meeting to allow all members to submit suggestions to Lori Conchado.

Closing

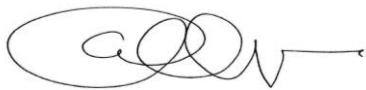
Chair, Patrick Nelligan is honored to have been appointed and serve on the board since 2016 and is honored to work with this committed group.

Commissioner asked trustees to reach out if they have any specific information they would like presented at our next meeting.

Meetings for 2024 were set for March 13th, June 12th, September 18th and December 11th.

There being no further business Chair Nelligan entertained a motion to adjourn which was accepted by Trustee Hodges, seconded by Trustee Adgers and the meeting adjourned at 5:01 p.m. The next meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, March 13, 2024 at 3:30 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'P. Nelligan', written over a horizontal line.

Patrick Nelligan, Chair
DVA Board of Trustees

Date December 20, 2023