



**Department of Veterans Affairs  
State of Connecticut**

**Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes  
March 10, 2021**

*(Minutes subject to review at next Board Meeting)*

**I. Convene Meeting:**

The Meeting (conducted via Teams meeting platform) was called to order by Chairman Thomas at 3:35 PM.

In attendance: John Banks, Paul Barry, Phil Cacciola, Juan Cruz, Richard Dziekan, Peter Galgano, Steven Harris, Alyssa Kelleher, Patrick Nelligan, Sharad Samy, Heather Sandler, Michael Thomas, Kjell Tollefsen, Sherri Vogt and Dawn Works-Dennis.

Absent: Richard Benson, Frederick Leaf and Mark Spranzo

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

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

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

Commissioner Saadi spoke briefly about the events that took place since December 2020 including the January 25<sup>th</sup> Ribbon Cutting & dedication of another Quality of Life Improvement Project specifically updated semi-private rooms in D-Wing. On February 3<sup>rd</sup> the DVA hosted State Senator Cicarella for a briefing on DVA operations and tour of the Campus. During the tour the Senator met with CT National Guard personnel conducting critical training exercises related to chemical, biological radiological, nuclear and explosive response operations. Commissioner Saadi reported that the DVA was at the forefront of coordinating COVID-19 vaccine clinics for DVA Veterans and Staff at the Rocky Hill Campus and that to date more than 90% of DVA Veteran Residents and Patients and over 50% of DVA staff have been vaccinated. On February 25<sup>th</sup> the DVA hosted its annual ceremony commemorating Black History Month with Keynote Speaker Vanessa Dorantes, Commissioner of the Department of Children and Families (DCF). The ceremony included remarks by Commissioner Saadi, Residential Director Lesbia Nieves and poems and songs by DVA Veterans and staff. The event was held in the DVA auditorium and broadcast via Teams and Zoom.

The upcoming events include DVA Veterans Service Organization Leaders Quarterly Meeting hosted by Commissioner Saadi on March 23<sup>rd</sup>, DVA Campus ADA and other Residential projects Ribbon Cutting on April 21<sup>st</sup>, DVA Veteran Memorial Service in the Healing Garden on May 27<sup>th</sup>, a Gold Star Family Event at a date to be determined and the CT Veterans Hall of Fame inductees for the class of 2020, to be held in July or August.

## **II. Old/Ongoing Business**

### **A. COVID-19 Response & Recovery**

Commissioner Saadi reported DVA point in time testing and positivity data with two hundred and forty-one Veteran Residents and Patients having been tested for COVID-19. 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.

Commissioner Saadi reported that the DVA has been conducting regular COVID-19 testing all direct care and front-line staff since July, fifty-seven staff members tested COVID-19 positive since the beginning of the pandemic, fifty-six recovered and returned to work consistent with DPH guidelines. One DVA staff member remains out and in physical rehab.

### **B. Budgeting and Staffing**

Chairman Thomas recognized DVA Fiscal Director Briana Mitchell for an update on the budget and staffing trends. She reports that the DVA has a budget of 26.5 million dollars which is flat funding based on the current budget. Ms. Mitchell reported that the DVA billing department celebrated its first and successful Medicare submission and payment since the transition of the Healthcare Center to a Skilled Nursing Facility. These funds from Medicare revenue will be deposited into the State's General Fund. Fiscal year 2021 overtime averages currently higher than previous two fiscal years, COVID-19 Relief Funds have been exhausted and there were some retirement payouts as well. The Fiscal department is performing an in-depth review of all DVA appropriations and expenditures to ensure responsible spending and effective fiscal oversight. Trustee Vogt asked if there was an opportunity to apply for federal dollars to cover expenses incurred due to COVID-19 staffing and Ms. Mitchell responded that the DVA did receive and has exhausted its COVID-19 relief funds.

Chairman Thomas asked Commissioner Saadi to update the board on the IGW (Institutional General Welfare Fund). Commissioner Saadi reported that in working with DVA Fiscal staff he is implementing the realignment of expenditures from the IGW and has also identified areas of savings. A total of \$796,000 of expenditures is to be shifted from the IGW through spending cuts and reallocations. He reported projected savings of \$175,000 by ending consultant support to DVA Healthcare Center, a total of \$540,000 to be shifted Other Expenses (OE) to pay for medical supplies, specialty medical bed rental and laundering service for the Healthcare Center, \$81,000 of varied IGW expenses to be shifted to donations. Commissioner Saadi also reported \$84,000 in projected saved by ending two temporary support services staff contracts. While these steps will not yet achieve long term solvency they will extend IGW solvency concurrent with FY22 and FY23 allowing time to implement additional changes to achieve long-term solvency. The DVA will need to find OE savings to avoid a deficit however, should

the DVA run a deficit the Commissioner will work with OPM and the Financial Advisory Committee (FAC) to cover the DVA obligations.

Trustee Dziekan asked if the 2021 CARES Act funds would benefit the DVA. Commissioner Saadi reported that the CARES Act law allocates several billion dollars to the State of Connecticut however, it is unclear as to how the funds will be distributed and whether the DVA will receive any direct funding.

### C. Projects Report

Projects and Operations Director Joe Danao provided a DVA projects update which include the completion of the two Cemetery Projects – expansion and appearance, the abatement projects in building 2, the Cantina and Building 22 at the Middletown State Veterans Cemetery. He also reported completion of the Fire Alarm and Suppression System project and near completion of the ADA upgrades to Buildings 2, 3, and 4. 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. Commissioner Saadi's directed Residential Facility Quality of Life Improvements are proceeding including the completion of A-Wing Isolation Unit and D-Wing semiprivate living upgrades, planning for another residential Wing to be upgraded, WiFi expansion and upgrades and general repairs and painting.

### D. Cemetery Property Acquisition

Commissioner Saadi reported that the DVA has received the appraisals and made an offer of \$350,000 for the 13.6 acres of land abutting the Veterans Cemetery in Middletown which was initially rejected by the parish. The DAS State Property division then contacted the parish and asked for reconsideration of the outright rejection and to make a good faith counteroffer. Unfortunately the parish rejected further discussions absent the DVA increasing its offer. The acquisition of St. Mary's parcel would extend the operational life of the cemetery by decades allowing for the addition of 4,025 standard plots, 7,000 cremation plots and 6,000 columbarium niches. Commissioner Saadi contacted DMHAS Commissioner Delphin-Rittmon regarding an eight-acre parcel on Bow Lane owned by CVH. Commissioner Delphin-Rittmon is agreeable to the transfer of the property to the DVA however the DMHAS legal department advised that the property must remain in CVH inventory until conclusion of ongoing litigation. The next step is possibly increasing the offer to St. Mary's Parish and continue discussions with CVH pending the outcome of litigation. Commissioner Saadi will update the Lt Governor Susan Bysiewicz who is in full support of the DVA acquiring additional property for the Cemetery.

### E. Wreaths Across America Ceremony Planning for December 2021

Ryan McKenna, Director of Advocacy and Assistance, reported that approximately 150 people attended the Wreaths Across America Ceremony on December 19, 2020, consistent with the Governor's Executive Orders. This included volunteers from CAP, Patriot Guard Riders, Easterseals, the Middletown Police Department and the Middletown Fire Department. Mr. McKenna reported that he held an After Action Review on February 4<sup>th</sup> regarding the December, 2020 event which CAP leadership were invited to attend but did not respond. This year's event is planned for December 18<sup>th</sup> and that there will need to be stakeholder's involvement in the selling of the wreaths. A kickoff meeting will be held in June and bi-weekly meetings will start in mid-September. The stakeholders can discuss fund raising events as well as determining price of the wreaths and profit margin usage.

### III. New Business

#### A. Legislative Update

Commissioner reported on the pending legislation on which he testified in favor of before the General Assembly including expanded benefits for certain Veterans with an Other Than Honorable discharge OTH; Veteran Status question on state forms; recognition of training and skills developed in the military in the issuance of state licenses and registrations; providing certain state Veteran recognitions to members of the Hmong Laotian Special Guerilla Units which supported the U.S. during the Vietnam War; establishing additional registration marker plates for Veterans and members of the Armed forces who served in period of war and an Act concerning workforce development. Commissioner Saadi explained that he testified against a bill which would require the DVA to provide transportation services to Veterans and bill Medicare/Medicaid and Tricare unless the DVA was also provided with funds for a fleet of vehicles and staff to drive them. He explained that the DVA fiscal office would also need additional staff to process billing and that the funds, absent additional legislation, would go to the State's General Fund and not the DVA. Without the additional staff and funds the bill would have a serious negative impact on the direct delivery of current programs and services to our Veterans at our Rocky Hill Campus and across the State. The Commissioner also testified In favor of a task force to study updating the Veterans property tax relief laws and a bill that would direct federal reimbursements for DAV prescription drug purchases to the IGW.

Trustee Barry raised concerns of lack of documentation for Hmong Laotian Veterans and that the DAV would not be able to determine who were bonified Veterans. Commissioner Saadi stated that this was a legislative decision and that the DVA would follow the procedure the Federal National Cemetery Administration follows to determine Hmong Laotian Veterans eligibly for burial in State Veterans Cemeteries.

#### IV. Closing

Chairman Thomas announced that he is resigning from the Board effective tomorrow due to increased employment obligations and that he recommends that Vice-Chair Nelligan serve as acting Chair and hopes that the Governor will appoint Mr. Nelligan and BOT Chair. Chair Thomas expressed his deep appreciation for the work of the BOT members and highlighted some of the accomplishments especially the close work of the BOT with Commissioner Saadi and the DVA staff throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Per the scheduled dates set by the Board the next meeting is scheduled for June 9<sup>th</sup> at 3:30, venue to be determined. Motion to adjourn was made and passed unanimously at 5:24 PM.

Respectfully Submitted:



Michael Thomas, Chair  
DVA Board of Trustees

Date 3/25/21