



**Department of Veterans Affairs
State of Connecticut**

**Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes
June 1, 2017**

(Minutes subject to review at next Board Meeting)

I. Convene Meeting:

The Meeting was called to order by Acting Chair Patrick Nelligan at 3:33PM in the DVA Commissioner's conference room.

Pledge of allegiance was led by Acting Chair Nelligan followed by the taking of attendance of Board members.

In attendance: Paul Barry, Richard Benson, Philip Cacciola, Robert Cheslock, Amy Donahue, Richard Dziekan, Peter Galgano, Steven Harris, Brien Horan, Frederick Leaf, Patrick Nelligan, Tatiana Quinzi, Michael Thomas, Michael Tetrault, Kjell Tollefsen.

Absent: Christopher McDavid, and Paul Tarbox.

Acting Chairman Nelligan asked DVA Chief of Staff and General Counsel Thomas Saadi to swear in the re-appointed members of the Board not previously sworn. Those sworn in were Trustees Cacciola, Harris and Quinzi.

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

Commissioner Connolly presented a general update of DVA activities to the Board highlighting recent Veteran and DVA achievements, including the Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Day at the Capitol, The first Annual Connecticut Medal of Honor Recipients Ceremony at the State Capitol and the Groundbreaking ceremony for the Fisher Foundation House on the West Haven VA Campus. Commissioner Connolly then discussed upcoming DVA and Veteran events, such as the UCONN Veterans Administrators Conference on June 6th, Quinnebaug Valley Community College Stand Down on June 10th, Wartime Service Medal ceremony at Middletown Elks Club on June 21st and the Yard Goats Veterans Appreciation Game on August 13th.

II. Old Business

Acting Chairman Nelligan then requested, without objection, that item A under New Business be moved to the first item under Old Business and asked Chief of Staff Tom Saadi to introduce Assistant Attorneys General (AAG) Gary Hawes and Caitlan Calder. AAGs Hawes

and Calder presented the proposed multi-state Veterans Charities Sweep being coordinated among all the States' Attorneys General. The purpose is to identify "bad actors" and educate potential donors in ways to avoid scams and questionable charities. Chief of Staff Saadi commented on the importance of the sweep and explained how Trustees and others can contact the Attorney General's Office with ideas and concerns. Acting Chairman Nelligan stated that he knew of three charities of concern and asked how to deal with them prior to the Sweep. Trustee Galgano also mentioned charities of concern and the use of paid solicitors. AAG Hawes explained that at any time a person may file a complaint with the Department of Consumer Protection which has primary jurisdiction on such matters and he want onto say that the use of paid solicitors were not per se illegal. Trustee Leaf asked whether the OAG could require the display of charitable credentials to which AAG Hawes responded that such requirement is a Legislative issue. Trustee Benson asked whether Charities must register locally to which AAG Hawes responded that it depends on the level of conduct in CT and other states. Commissioner Connolly asked about enforcement and whether the OAG has a consumer fact sheet the DVA could distribute to which AAG Hawes responded that enforcement is ongoing and that there is a fact sheet on the OAG website.

A. Residential Facility Program Fee Update

Commissioner Connolly updated the Board as to the overall success in the implementation of the updated DVA Program Fee and the first month's collection rates. Acting Chairman Nelligan asked whether new Veteran Residents are utilizing the 4 months Program Fee waiver successfully to which the Commissioner replied in the affirmative.

B. Residential Voluntary Discharge Data:

Commissioner Connolly explained the general increase, this year over last, in the number of voluntary discharges of Veteran Residents highlighting the fact that most were to community based housing with some Veterans purchasing their own homes. Trustee Barry asked whether the DVA tracks success. Commissioner replied that we provide three months of post discharge support and monitoring but do not track discharged Veterans after that period. Director of Residential Services Maria Cheney explained that after the 90 days the DVA does receive anecdotal information regarding success in community based housing. Trustee Tollefsen asked whether the return rate to DVA by voluntarily discharged Veterans is less than 20% to which Director Cheney responded in the affirmative.

C. DOL Detail and General Work Program Settlement update:

Acting Chair Nelligan asked Chief of Staff Saadi to provide an update on the DVA DOL Detail and General Worker settlement. Chief of Staff Saadi explained that the DVA is working with the outside claims administrator to finalize the payment mailings to 139 verified Veteran Claimants and Estates. He explained that while the DVA is ahead of the Federal deadline, it is behind on its internal time line as additional tax and DOL receipt of payment documents had to be processed in response to Veteran Claimants' concerns and DOL requirements. Trustee Benson asked for the name of the Claims Administrator and whether it was affiliated with the State Claims Commissioner. Saadi identified the Administrator as Garden City out of Washington and Florida and explained that they are a state of CT approved contractor and utilized by the OAG for process consumer restitution payments and that it is not affiliated with the CT Claims Commissioner.

Commissioner Connolly asked Chief of Staff Saadi to provide an update on the Aillon Cemetery disinterment matter. Saadi explained that Mr. Aillon, a Vietnam era Veteran, has been incorrectly buried in the Middletown Veterans Cemetery as the DVA did not know at the time of burial that he was a convicted triple murderer. According to the Federal Cemetery Administration he must be disinterred if the DVA is to receive the two pending Federal Grants (approximately \$6 Million). The DVA attempted directly and through the OAG for over a year to work out a settlement with the family of Mr. Aillon without success and have now filed for a Probate Court order for custody of the remains for the purpose of disinterring the remains.

D. Budget Update:

Acting Chair Nelligan asked the Commissioner for a budget update. Commissioner Connolly reviewed the Governor's proposed Budget revisions equaling cuts of \$310,569 in FY 2018 and \$2,389,989 in FY 2019. He explained that this is one of several budget proposals being considered by the Legislature and that the Governor's revisions were not based on input from DVA prior to publication. Trustee Barry said that several years ago there was a proposal to eliminate OA&A and wanted to know who makes these decisions and why is OA&A Manager position eliminated? Commissioner Connolly explained that the OA&A Manager position was not eliminated but due to the hiring freeze DVA has not been able to fill the vacancy. He further explained that DVA was resubmitting to have the position approved for refill. Trustees Barry and Benson both criticized the proposed cuts and stated that the DVA has been cut from \$34 million in 2007 to about \$25 million in 2017 and that these cuts are drastic and that the Board needs to say no to this budget and send a letter to OPM Secretary Ben Barnes and the Governor. Trustee Tollefsen agreed with the concerns but suggested meeting with Secretary Barnes. Acting Chair Nelligan stated that Trustees should contact Legislators directly. Trustee Harris said that this issue should be treated similarly to civil rights issues and that Board members should get directly in front of Legislators to express objections to proposed cuts to DVA. Chief of Staff Saadi recommended that the Board members contact elected officials directly and encourage others to do so because if the Board sent a collective letter others may not take action on their own. Saadi stated that multiple letters, calls and emails from a broad range of Veterans and friends of Veterans will have a greater impact. Trustee Thomas stated that the Board must be cognizant of the fact that the state is in dire fiscal straights.

Commissioner Connolly stated that in spite of recent reductions and holdback the DVA continues to Serve Those Who Served and have done more with less funding through partnerships, expansion of internship and volunteer programs and new ways of delivering services. He stated that he does not want to see these or any cuts and while he opposes such cuts he stressed that the DVA and the Board must look at new ways to support Veterans and deliver services. Commissioner Connolly then said he would look into holding a Special Board meeting or setting up a meeting with Secretary Barnes and would follow up with the Board.

Acting Chair Nelligan then asked for a projects update by Projects and Operations Director Joe Danao. Director Danao provided an update on the Middletown Veterans Cemetery plot expansion grant and the maintenance and beautification grant. Director Danao explained that DVA has several other projects racked high on the Federal reimbursement list including a new Fire Alarm and suppression system, Emergency generator, and ADA upgrades. Director Danao announced that the Residential F-Wing computer and Entertainment room is complete and will open soon for Veteran Residents.

Trustee Thomas asked about the functional life of alarm systems to which Director Danao responded that the norm was ten years. Trustee Tetreault asked if the F-Wing room will have Wi-Fi to which Director Danao responded in the affirmative. Director Danao then reviewed a list of planned smaller projects across the DVA Campus including a new generator, future Day room renovations and the cleaning of the DVA Veterans' Monument.

III. New Business

A. CT Attorney General Veteran Charities Sweep:

This issue was taken up as first item under Old Business.

B. Legislative Update:

Acting Chair Nelligan asked Chief of Staff Saadi for a Legislative update. Chief of Staff Saadi explained the details of the bills and status as follows:

(1) S.B. 342, which would clarify the definition of Veteran in CGS 27-103(a)(2) to include, number of days of active service notwithstanding, any one honorably discharged or released under honorable conditions from the Armed Forces within the definition of Veteran. This bill is pending a vote on the Senate calendar. Saadi noted that the bill would not expand the number of Veterans who would qualify for benefits or honors reserved for disabled Veterans, Wartime Service Veterans or Veterans just coming off of active duty or their eligible survivors (e.g. municipal tax abatements, wartime service medal, tuition waiver, one year waived motor vehicle registration, etc . . .) because those statutes expressly define eligibility in a manner more restrictive than the baseline definition of Veteran in C.G.S. 27-103(a)(2).

(2) H.B. 7102 would provide increased protection to Veteran and service member information including Selective Service or Military Identification numbers, military discharge documents, and copies of military identity cards by including such information within the ambit of other protected information pursuant to C.G.S. § 42-471. Violators would be subject to civil penalties of up to \$500 for each violation as well as injunctive relief. The bill passed the House and is pending in the Senate.

(3) S.B. 857 would designate the DVA Rocky Hill Campus as the "Connecticut Veterans Center". Saadi stated that the Committee amended the bill based on a proposal by State Rep. Anthony Guerrero to rename the campus the "Rocky Hill, Connecticut Veterans Center" and that is a misnomer communicating that the campus is a Municipal entity instead of a statewide campus for all Connecticut Veterans. The bill is not on the Senate calendar but as attempts to amend the bill to reflect the original language failed due to objections by Rep. Guerrero, the bill will likely not come up for a vote.

(4) H.B. 7101 clarifies, consistent with federal law, that members of the National Guard and Armed Forces Reserve components who do not have active duty service beyond that for initial entry training are eligible for burial in our State Veterans Cemeteries if they are entitled to receive retirement pay under 10 USC chapter 1223 or, but for, their age would otherwise be eligible to collect such retirement pay. The Bill is pending a vote in the House.

Commissioner Connolly then presented updates as to progress on the DVA strategic objectives outlined at the previous Board meeting as follows: (1) Continue Revitalizing DVA's Residential Program with greater support services, new Vocational program, additional partnerships; (2) Begin Three Key Projects, two cemetery projects and one campus project which is the fire alarm and sprinkler replacement and upgrades in Building 2; (3) Review and Update Office of Advocacy and Assistance and Burial and Memorial Service; and (4) Expand Partnerships and Collaboration for Connecticut's Veterans Center of Excellence.

IV. Closing remarks

There being no further business, Acting Chair Nelligan entertained a motion to adjourn. Motion was made by Trustee Benson and seconded by Trustee Thomas. Motion passed unanimously at 5:10PM.

Respectfully Submitted:



Patrick Nelligan, Acting Chair
DVA Board of Trustees

Date 12 June 2017