



**Department of Veterans Affairs
State of Connecticut**

**Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes
March 8, 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 and was called to order by Chair Patrick Nelligan at 3:30 p.m.

Trustees in attendance: Richard Adgers, John Banks, Paul Barry, Phil Cacciola, Carlita Cotton, Juan Cruz, Peter Galgano Jr., Adele Hodges, Frederick Leaf, John Lawlor, and Sherri Vogt.

Absent: Richard Dzeikan Steven M. Harris, Alyssa Kelleher, Sharad Samy and Heather Sandler

Attending via TEAMS: Chair, Patrick Nelligan

DVA Staff in attendance: Commissioner Thomas J. Saadi, Lori Conchado, John Carragher, Briana Mitchell and Jane Siegel

Commissioner Saadi introduced Mr. Richard Adgers, our newly elected Veterans Council President. Mr. Adgers was sworn in by Ms. Jane Siegel, DVA Council.

Chair, Patrick Nelligan entertained a motion to approve the minutes of the previous meeting which were accepted by Trustee Lawlor and seconded by Trustee Vogt. The minutes were passed unanimously without any corrections or edits.

Chair Nelligan asked Commissioner Saadi to brief on DVA achievements and events.

Commissioner Saadi reported the Wreaths Across American event netted nearly \$20,000 for the DVA Perpetual Care Fund. A total of 12,00 wreaths were placed at the state's cemeteries in Middletown and Rocky Hill by more than 500 volunteers.

Office of Advocacy & Assistance Manager, Mr. John Carragher, joined with the family of Charles Fuller, Sr. of Manchester for a surprise 100th birthday party presenting him with a Wartime Service Medal for his service in the US Navy in WWII. Commissioner Saadi and Mr. Carragher met with a group of Vietnam Veterans in Danbury to present information on the PACT Act and address concerns about access to certain federal services. DVA Veteran Service Officer, Devon Julien attended a Windsor Veterans Rally hosted by the Greater Windsor Veterans Council presenting available programs and services for veterans and their families. DVA Healthcare Center Director of Nursing 1, Sarah de los Cientos, attended a recruiting event to support the recruitment of healthcare and skilled professionals for those serving Connecticut residents.

The 2022 Hall of Fame event was held on January 19, 2023 with twelve new members inducted, including a presentation to the family of Michael Zacchea, who received the award posthumously.

DVA's Black History Month Ceremony was a great success with State Representative Anthony Nolan, Co-chair of the Legislative VA Committee delivering remarks as the Keynote speaker. Also delivering remarks were Lt. Governor Susan Bysiewicz, U.S. Senator Richard Blumenthal, Congressman Joe Courtney, Congresswoman Jahana Hayes, Attorney General William Tong and CT Secretary of the State Stephanie Thomas. The large audience included Veterans, Legislators, State Officials, Statewide Veteran Leaders and DVA staff to include Ms. Adrienne Nails, who sang the Black National Anthem and Bille Holiday's "God Bless This Child"

Upcoming events include the DVA's Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Ceremony scheduled for March 30th, Afghanistan & Iraq Veterans Gala on April 22nd in Danbury, A Gold Star Family Memorial event is tentatively set for the spring of 2023 and the Armed Forces Day Luncheon on May 19th at the Aqua Turf Club in Southington.

Trustee Vogt presented an alibi to announce two upcoming events, "Rock For Vets" to be held on May 20th and September 15th at Crystal Bees Music Venue in Southington. The 400-seat venue will host a Led Zepplin cover band and others to raise funds for our 2023 Wreaths Across America Fund. Tickets are \$20 or \$25 dollars with 100% of proceeds going to our WAA Fund. (Information and details are forthcoming).

II. Old/Ongoing Business

A. Fiscal Report

Director of Fiscal Services, Ms. Briana Mitchell provided a brief overview of the DVA Fiscal Budget reporting the DVA and Personal Services (PS) fund currently has a surplus with on-going recruitment for essential positions. Other Expenses (OE) budget is tight for the 3rd Quarter with raising costs for utilities.

In response to Trustee Barry's question, Ms. Mitchell clarified that the DVA Bond funds are not in place to cover additional utility costs. All expenses are being closely monitored to ensure continued support of services needed by our Veteran are met. Staff are being asked to check inventory prior to ordering, all purchases are being scrutinized and staff meetings regarding purchasing are on-going.

B. Projects & Operations Report

Commissioner Saadi reported the boiler project design phase is on target from bonding and a vendor in place. Our new system is expected to have a life expectancy of 30-40 years. Rented shoring is in place for the Main Dining Room deck as the department continues to work on support to repair the decking as close to it's original design as possible while ensuring structural stability. The design layout for repairs of Garage 7, where Veterans work on vehicles, is approved with funding in place. The department is waiting on a date for the vendor to begin work on the floor. Many other repairs have been made to include new windows. The construction of a 20x30 covered Pavilion in our quad is expected to begin in April and is funded by a single private donation. Additional funds will be needed to cover plumbing and electrical. The new pavilion will be a space for Veterans to gather indoors or outside regardless of inclement weather.

C. Cemetery Property Acquisition

Based on current burials of approximately 700 per year, our operational life at the state cemetery in Middletown is 3-7 years. Discussions are still in place with a DMHAS and Town of Middletown for parcels of land on/near Bow Lane. Bond Funds are being considered as a source for funding to reach back out to St. Mary's Parish to negotiate for their land. DAS and Construction Services have been supportive and flexible to discussions of possibly making an offer.

D. Residential Program Fee Update

An increase in the monthly income level for exempting Veterans from program fees is being considered due to the 8.9% increase in Social Security benefits which began in January 2023. The loss of revenue to the IGW of approximately \$133k annually would require either decreased expenses or new sources of income.

Trustee Samy volunteered during our December Board meeting to serve as the Chair for a Sub-committee to discuss and make recommendations for a new fee structure to Commissioner Saadi. Chair Nelligan requested volunteers to participate. Trustee Adgers, Cacciola and Barry accepted.

III. New Business

A. Office of Advocacy and Assistance – New Case Management, Staffing & Relocation Update

OA&A Manger, Mr. John Carragher reported the level of staffing within the unit has increased to our minimum level with a full complement of 11 VSO's and 5 Office Assistants anticipated to be in place in April 2023. Our current VSO's have responded to 7,543 inquires that resulted in 107 million in disability payments annually to our Veterans.

The department has researched and is ready to purchase a case management system that will allow VSO's to digitally submit claims in a more efficient manner that will provide data on the population we are serving and issues addressed.

A Ribbon Cutting ceremony is being planned for March 2023 to celebrate the opening of our new District 5 Office in Fairfield.

PACT Act Update: A total of 439 claims have been received by our VSO's since January 2023.

B. Legislative Updates

HB 6395: AN ACT APPROPRIATING FUNDS TO THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS – Commissioner Saadi backs this proposal to add \$37,000 to our OE account to off-set the cost of providing mandatory meals to staff which are currently paid through the IGW Fund.

Trustee Vogt offered to prepare a draft letter of support to share with the group.

SB 634: AN ACT CONCERNING MUNICIPAL VETERANS SERVICES – Commissioner supports the concept of the DVA overseeing municipal representatives, however would need additional staff to support.

SB 636: 636 AN ACT CONCERNING UPKEEP OF VETERANS' GRAVES – Commissioner opposes this bill as it would require additional staff to review, investigate and respond to thousands of inquiries and

monitor issues in private cemeteries across the state. Commissioner suggests amendments may need to be made to laws addressing the responsibility of associations to properly maintain their property.

HB 5510: AN ACT INCLUDING THE UNITED STATES SPACE FORCE IN THE DEFINITION OF "ARMED FORCES" – Commissioner supports this bill.

SB 1129: AN ACT CONCERNING ASSISTANCE FOR PUBLICATION OF VETERANS' OBITUARIES – Commissioner opposes as there are many considerations on the logistics of processing requests and would require additional staff to handle.

C. Appointment of New Vice Chair

Chair Nelligan is soliciting a member to participate as the Co-Chair on our Board due to the resignation of Ms. Dawn Works-Dennis. Ms. Works-Dennis has played an important role providing support to Chair Nelligan on both a monthly and sometimes weekly basis. Members who feel they have the time and interest in filling this role are encouraged to reach out to either Chair Nelligan or Commissioner.

Closing

Chair, Patrick Nelligan closed by thanking all the dedicated members of the Board for their vigilance and asked that we remember the sacrifices of all who serve and particularly those in Ukraine.

There being no further business Chair Nelligan entertained a motion to adjourn which was accepted by Trustee Lawlor, seconded by Trustee Leaf and the meeting adjourned at 4:51 p.m. The next meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, June 7, at 3:30 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted:



Patrick Nelligan, Chair
DVA Board of Trustees

Date March 21, 2023