



**Department of Veterans Affairs  
State of Connecticut**

**Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes  
September 8, 2021**

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

**I. Convene Meeting:**

The Meeting was called to order by Commissioner Saadi through Chairman Nelligan at 3:30 PM.

In attendance: John Banks, Paul Barry, Richard Benson, Phil Cacciola, Juan Cruz, Richard Dziekan, Peter Galgano, Adele Hodges, Alyssa Kelleher, Frederick Leaf, Patrick Nelligan, Sharad Samy, Heather Sandler, Mark Spranzo and Sherri Vogt.

Absent: Steven Harris and Dawn Works-Dennis.

In attendance from the DVA: Commissioner Thomas Saadi, Joseph Danao, Darlene Deschaine, and Jane Siegel.

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

Chairman Nelligan asked Commissioner Saadi to present recent DVA achievements and events.

Commissioner Saadi spoke about recent events including the 2020 CT Veterans Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony held on July 2021 and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company Governor's Horse Guard Graduation held on August 1<sup>st</sup>. Commissioner Saadi reported of the many events around the state he attended including the West Hartford Korean War Veterans Recognition Ceremony, the VFW Post 149 Danbury Annual Family Picnic, the VFW Brookfield Patriotic Boat Parade, the DVA Veteran Residents Equine "Manes & Motion" therapy Graduation and the dedication of the John DeMello Memorial Veteran's Center in Southington City Hall. The Commissioner also attended the Waterbury Legislative Delegation's Suit Drive with donations going to Save a Suit in Bethel, CT, which will clean and distribute the suits to CT Veterans in need.

Upcoming events include the DVA 9/11 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Memorial Ceremony which will be held at the DVA Main Campus Auditorium, the Waterbury Veterans Tombstones Restoration Project Ceremony and DVA's annual Veterans Stand Down which will be held as informational webinars September 22-24. Stand Down 2021 In-Person Regional sites include Rocky Hill, Norwich, Bridgeport, Danbury and Danielson from 8:00am – 2:00pm. On October 1<sup>st</sup> the Veteran Unclaimed Cremated Remains Burial

Ceremony with Military Honors will take place at the State Veterans Cemetery in Middletown at 10:30am. The Commissioner is also organizing the October 23<sup>rd</sup> Beirut Veterans Memorial Monument Dedication in Danbury and will attend various events around the state on Veterans Day, November 11<sup>th</sup>. In December the Class of 2021 CT Veterans Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony will take place.

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

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

Commissioner Saadi provided a DVA point in time roll up of testing and COVID data with two hundred and fifty-two Veteran Residents and Patients having been tested for COVID-19 since March 2020. Seventy testing positive, with sixty-three having recovered from the virus, one Veteran in Community based COVID Recovery Unit 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 2020 and January 2021. One Veteran Patient with COVID-19 passed in December from a non-COVID-19 medical occurrence. Ninety-nine percent of Veteran Residents and Patients are fully vaccinated.

Commissioner Saadi reported that the DVA has been conducting regular COVID-19 testing of all direct care and front-line staff since July 2020 and that seventy staff members tested COVID-19 positive since the beginning of the pandemic, with sixty-four staff having recovered and returned to work consistent with DPH guidelines and two remain in recovery. Seventy-six percent of DVA staff are vaccinated for COVID-19.

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

Chairman Nelligan recognized Commissioner Saadi to update on the budget and staffing trends in the absence of Fiscal Director Briana Mitchell. He reported that the fiscal year which ended June 30, 2021 closed within available appropriations. Responsible shifts in expenditures from IGW to OE and the targeted application of CARES Act funds to cover COVID-19 related expenses have significantly improved the fiscal stability of the IGW which was previously projected to be insolvent in mid-2022. Preliminary estimates show DVA remains in fiscal balance for this fiscal year and emergency staffing needs in the healthcare facility will be manageable within the Personal Services appropriation. Fiscal Administration is performing an in-depth review of all DVA appropriations and relief funding to ensure responsible spending and effective fiscal oversight.

Chairman Nelligan asked the Commissioner to update the board on the IGW. The Commissioner reported that with implementation of the adjustments briefed at the June meeting totaling \$796,000 and OPMs released of OE and PS holdbacks to the DVA the IGW is no longer projected to be insolvent the third quarter of 2022. While these changes do not yet achieve sustained long-term solvency, this approach does extend IGW solvency beyond FY23 allowing time to implement additional changes to achieve long-term solvency. One remaining legislative item is the reallocation of expenditures for federally reimbursed pharmaceuticals from the IGW to the State's General fund. This would result in a savings of nearly \$300,000 in the IGW and set the fund on a course to long-term sustained solvency. DVA is reasonably confident that this measure will be approved in the 2023 Legislative session.

### C. Projects Report

Projects and Operations Director Joe Danao began his remarks by stating that Commissioner Saadi will provide an update regarding State Veteran Cemetery Property Acquisition. Mr. Danao reported that the Rocky Hill campus abatement of building 2 is complete while Building 5 is ongoing. The Campus Security System for the New Gatehouse is in the planning phase and water improvement project is in the programming phase. The DVA Energy Efficiency Project is in Phase II and DEEP grant approved \$270,000 for metering. The DVA Auditorium functional and safety upgrades are complete and the Residential Facility Quality of Life Improvements are proceeding including the preparation phase for G-Wing. The other projects that will need to be addressed will be roof replacement for the Healthcare Center, roof repairs for buildings 1, 2, and Levitow Lane.

Chairman Nelligan asked Trustee Vogt to update the board on Wreaths Across America. Trustee Vogt reported that the goal is to sell at least 9,000 wreaths by Thanksgiving Eve. She is asking every trustee to sell at least 200 wreaths each. The wreaths are purchased online, with a check, or with the QRL code for \$15 each. All proceeds from this initiative will be used for the perpetual care of the CT Veterans Cemetery. DVA Veterans Cemetery has a code location, and there is a code for this specific initiative by the CT DVA BOT. The next Wreaths Planning Meeting is October 8<sup>th</sup>.

### D. Cemetery Property Acquisition

Commissioner Saadi reported that while discussion with St. Mary's Parish were stalled the broker has reached out to explain that the property is still available however, the DVA offer of \$350,000 for the 13.6 acres is far from the \$1 million sought by the parish. The DVA has sent a letter of interest in the property to the bankruptcy Trustee attempting to restart purchase discussions. The DVA contacted CVH regarding 8-acre parcel on Bow Lane which CVH is open to transfer, however, they must maintain this property in the CVH inventory until conclusion of ongoing litigation. There is a private parcel across Bow Lane held in trust with a life estate vesting in one person. The DVA is exploring legal options with entering into purchase discussions regarding that parcel. Acquisition of other CVH and private lots abutting cemetery or contiguous with CVH property totaling 9 acres are being explored. Commissioner Saadi will update the Lt Governor Susan Bysiewicz who is in full support of the DVA acquiring additional property for the Cemetery.

### E. Program Fee Review, Committee Report

At the June 9, 2021 BOT meeting Commissioner Saadi proposed that the current Residential Program Fee of 30% of income be reduced from 30% to 25% of Income and exempt from the Program Fee any Veteran with \$500 or less of monthly income to be effective October 1, 2021, which will be reflected in November Program Fee statement. The Chair asked the Sub-Committee to update the board on their recommendations. Trustee Kelleher reported that the subcommittee looked closely at options and how much money residents would have left as their own discretionary funds. One of the main concerns was residents on the lower end of the income paying a flat percentage. Instead, the Subcommittee proposes that the Program Fee be progressive with increasing percentage for those with higher income (like a progressive tax rate approach). Commissioner Saadi explained that the DVA did not currently have the capability to implement such an approach as, to be fair, the various brackets would have to lock percentages with any increased bracket not applying to the dollars subject to the lower bracket. Instead he asked the Board to reduce the Program Fee from 30% to 25% and then reconvene the subcommittee

to further review the possibility of a progressive program fee with the DVA. The board unanimously voted on reducing the Program Fee from 30% to 25% of income reflected in the November Program Fee statement.

### **III. New Business**

#### **A. Stand Down 2021**

Commissioner reported on the annual Veterans Stand Down September 22nd -24th that combines two days of online benefits presentations and a day with five regional in-person Veteran resource access sites across Connecticut. All Veterans and currently serving National Guard, Reserve and Active Duty personnel are eligible to attend Stand Down. Stand Down 2021 begins on Wednesday, September 22nd with a kickoff ceremony at 9:00am at the DVA Rocky Hill Campus. Following the ceremony will be a day of online Veterans benefits informational sessions from a variety of federal and state agencies and community service providers on topics including housing and homeless services, State labor/employment and vocational resources, Veteran caregiver support, legal assistance, education resources and more. On Friday, September 24th, there will be five in-person service locations throughout the State in Bridgeport, Danbury, Danielson, Norwich, Rocky Hill. These locations will be open from 8am-2pm and staffed by representatives of the regional Vet Centers, CT Bar Association, the DVA and many Veteran Service Organizations and community based providers to provide benefits information, pro-bono legal services and free COVID-19 testing, vaccines and flu shots by medical professionals.

#### **B. New Laws Affecting Veterans**

Commissioner Saadi reported on the new laws affecting veterans which include Public Act 21-79 Veterans' benefits for veterans discharged other than Honorably. The law, combined with PA 18-79, establishes a Board of Review to process applications from Veterans separated with a characterization of Other Than Honorable (OTH) due to PTSD, TBI, MST, sexual orientation, gender identity to determine whether the OTH should be treated as an honorable discharge for purposes of eligibility for state benefits. Public Act 21-51 Veterans recognition for Hmong Laotian Special Guerrilla Units which served in the Kingdom of Laos. The law provides verified SGU members eligibility for a CT Veterans Vehicle Marker Plate, Operators License/Identification cards and the Connecticut Wartime Service Medal. The DVA is working with the DMV to implement the law with the DVA conducting the eligibility review. HB 6481 Special Registration Marker Plates for Veterans and Members of the Armed Forces who served in periods of War. The law authorizes the DMV to issue vehicle marker plates recognizing specific wars or conflicts in which certain Veterans served. These are in addition to the current Connecticut Veterans plate and twelve other specialized Veteran's vehicle marker plates. The DVA is training DMV personnel to be able to determine period of service. Public Act 21-105 Establishing a veterans and Military Tourism trail. The law requires that the DECD in consultation with the Commissioner of Veterans Affairs establish a military and tourism hiking trail linking Veterans' museums, memorials, battleground sites and other historic sites.

#### **C. DPH Healthcare Affidavit**

Chairman Nelligan asked Commissioner Saadi to report on the DPH requirements of obtaining Healthcare Affidavits from the Board members. By state law all skilled nursing facilities must obtain Healthcare Affidavits from Board members. The Trustees completed these forms which DVA Attorney Jane Siegel notarized.

#### IV. Closing

There being no further business, Chairman Nelligan entertained a motion to adjourn. Per the scheduled dates set by the Board the next meeting is scheduled for December 8<sup>th</sup> at 3:30, venue to be determined. Motion to adjourn was made and passed unanimously at 5:38 PM.

Respectfully Submitted:

*Pat Nelligan*

---

Patrick Nelligan, Chair  
DVA Board of Trustees

Date 4 OCT 2021