

Connecticut Department of Veterans Affairs



Board of Trustees Annual Report for 2024

Patrick Nelligan
Board Chairperson

Ron Welch
Commissioner
Brigadier General, U.S. Army (Ret.)

February 15, 2025



“Serving Those Who Served”



Dear Governor Lamont and Members of the Veterans & Military Affairs Committee:

I am pleased to submit this report on behalf of the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) Board of Trustees (Board) in accordance with C.G.S. §27-102n(i). The DVA Board of Trustees (Board) continues working hard to serve Connecticut's Veterans through the oversight of and collaboration with the DVA along with local, state and federal agencies, Veteran Service Organizations, community partners and volunteers to ensure the delivery of Veterans programs and benefits in accordance with state and federal law and best practices in a sustainable manner. The Board operates pursuant to C.G.S. §27-102n, which requires the DVA to provide comprehensive quarterly reports to the Board on more than a dozen areas of DVA operations. In addition to providing these quarterly reports, the DVA also provides Veteran Residents with a semi-annual report on the revenue and expenditures of the DVA Institutional General Welfare Fund and the opportunities to submit suggestions for the use of the IGW.

The Board fulfilled its duties during 2024 through active engagement, collaboration and communication with the DVA Commissioner Welch and senior staff members. The Board continues its support of the DVA's delivery of programs and services to DVA resident Veterans and Veterans in the community. It is an honor to serve as the Chair of the Board of Trustees in our combined mission of "Serving Those Who Served."

Respectfully Submitted,

Patriek Nelligan
Chairperson
Veteran, United States Army

DVA Board of Trustees Annual Report for 2024

This report is submitted in accordance with C.G.S. §27-102n(i), which requires, in pertinent part, that the DVA Board of Trustees (Board) report on the progress in fulfilling its mission based on programmatic outcomes and provide recommendations for improving the delivery of services to veterans and the addition of new programs. The Board's statutory mission is to review and comment on the DVA Budget and major policy and programmatic changes and to review agency regulations prior to adoption by the Commissioner relating to:

- a. Residential and Healthcare programs admission, discharge and transfer policies.
- b. Residential Fee schedule for programs, services and benefits.
- c. Participation of eligible family members in programs or services.

Throughout calendar year 2024, the Board fulfilled its statutory mission through active engagement with the DVA leadership and oversight of DVA operations, policies and programs. The Board continued the ongoing highly collaborative process consistent with Commissioner Welch's philosophy of empowerment through transparency and bilateral engagement with the Board related to the full spectrum of DVA programs, services, events and activities. This is underscored by regular communications between Board meetings by Commissioner Welch and DVA staff with the Board on myriad issues across the full spectrum of DVA services.

At the Board's regular quarterly meetings, Commissioner Welch and DVA Senior Staff provided comprehensive and detailed PowerPoint briefings and supporting documentary updates regarding the agency budget, staffing, facilities, projects, legislation and policies along with proposals for expanded and additional programs as well as existing and anticipated challenges, fiscal and operational, impacting the DVA and Veterans programs across the State.

In addition to the briefings provided at each Board meeting, the DVA provided quarterly written reports to the Board with information necessary for the Board to fulfill its mission. These reports included, among other things, program and policy updates, data, and performance measures in the following areas:

- (1) Budget revenues and expenditures.
- (2) Staffing levels.
- (3) Facilities and fleet management.
- (4) Current and planned projects.
- (5) Residential Facility and Patriot's Landing Family Housing applications for admission including number of Veterans admitted, reasons for denials or withdrawals of applications for admission and overall monthly occupancy rates in residential programs.
- (6) Summary of voluntary and involuntary discharges from Veterans from the Residential Program and reasons for discharge (e.g. community based transitional housing, independent living, disciplinary actions, etc.)
- (7) Summaries of Healthcare Center patient census, clinical services and any incident rates.
- (8) Summary of programs overseen by the Office of Advocacy and Assistance and caseload figures for veterans' service officers.
- (9) Cemetery and Memorial services including burial statistics.

- (10) Results of any federal and/or state inspections.
- (11) Summaries by type, frequency and resolution, of concerns raised by Veteran Residents of the petitions and complaints filed by Veteran Residents and relatives or authorized representatives of such Veteran Residents.
- (12) Additional reports which have included updates on the Bed Bug eradication program, results of client surveys, and the status of rebuilding Office of Advocacy and Assistance staffing statewide.

The following is a summary of the Board's activities and recommendations as applicable for calendar year 2024:

The Board of Trustees held three meetings during calendar year 2024. The meetings were held on April 10, 2024, July 10, 2024, and October 9, 2024. Please note that last quarterly meeting for 2024 was held in January 2025 and is not included herein.

The Board reviewed the information submitted by the DVA at said meetings as referenced above, in addition to review of the DVA's quarterly reports submitted to the Board of Trustees.

The Board discussed and agreed that the Board would re-establish subcommittees with new leadership to address issues identify by DVA leadership and Connecticut General Statutes outlining Board of Trustees responsibilities.

The Board had no new specific recommendations during calendar year 2024.

Attached hereto are the minutes from each Board's meeting during 2024.

Department of Veterans Affairs Board of Trustees

Meeting Minutes for meetings held during 2024 Calendar Year:

- **April 10, 2024**
- **July 10, 2024**
- **October 9, 2024**



**Department of Veterans Affairs
State of Connecticut**

**Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes
April 10, 2024**
(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: Paul Barry, Phil Cacciola, Carlita Cotton, Tara Desjardins, Richard Dzieken, Peter Galgano Jr., Professor Moore, Sharad Samy, Heather Sandler, Michael Saylor and Sherri Vogt.

Absent: Juan Cruz, Richard Harris, Adele Hodges, Alyssa Kelleher, John Lawlor, Frederick Leaf, Patrick Nelligan and Michael Saylor.

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

In the absence of Chair, Patrick Nelligan and Co-Chair John Lawlor, Commissioner Welch called the meeting to order at 3:34 p.m. and offered a motion to accept minutes for the January 31, 2023 meeting, which were accepted by Ms. Vogt and Mr. Galgano.

Action: Motion made, seconded, and carried.

Commissioner asked for a moment of silence to acknowledge the potential of Iran targeting military and government facilities in response to the April 1 Israeli airstrike that killed seven officials in Damascus.

Commissioner Welch provided an overview of DVA achievements for the past quarter to include three highly successful DVA events held on campus in the Gold Star Families Memorial Auditorium. In January the Hall of Fame induction ceremony welcomed 11 new members to a growing list of honorees, in February the agency held its Black History Month celebration with keynote speaker, Dr. Carlita Cotton and in March a Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans ceremony was attended by a record number of Veterans honoring their service to our country.

Commissioner reported on several collaborations with state agencies and private providers working on initiatives to include Governor Lamont's inter-agency collaboration to connect individuals with case managers in hubs statewide to assist with housing, Lt. Governor Bysiewicz's Commission on Women & Children and the induction of female Veterans in the Hall of Fame, Sgt. Fox Suicide Grant, DOL/DAS/DOT initiative to hire Veterans to fill shortages of EMS personnel, Department of Labor grant to provide outreach to Veterans for employment, and the Cohen Network's offering of mental health services.

Commissioner attended a PACT act press conference held at the Federal VA in West Haven with Senator Blumenthal to announce the expansion of PACT Act benefits and attended the National Association of State Department of Veterans Affairs conference in Washington with Secretary McDonough in attendance. The main topic discussed was the new Buy America Build America (BABA) requirement that will affect projects on campus.

The Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services and 211 visited the campus to view Building 50 as a possible temporary site for relocation of staff.

Commissioner Welch visited sites in Winsted and Hartford with private citizens and Legislators to provide support and gain insight into potential locations for Veteran housing. Internally, Easter Seals CT announced they will not renew their lease for on campus housing to Veterans on Levitow Lane as of 5/1. The DVA intends to utilize ARPA funds to renovate the buildings and provide additional housing for families as an extension of the Patriot's Landing program.

Upcoming events include preparations for Memorial Day ceremonies throughout the state and on campus, Salvation Army Band performance, Vet Rep Training and Stand Down 2024 scheduled for September 20th.

II. Old/Ongoing Business

A. Fiscal Report

Ms. Adrienne Nails reported the first, second and third quarter allotments are on track and the DVA is planning a balanced budget for 2024.

B. Projects & Operations Report

Deputy Commissioner Danao reported the DVA is looking for additional funding to support the pricing increase to boiler project. DC Danao will be meeting with DEEP on 4/11 to discuss. In response to Trustee Barry's inquiry on the delay of this project, DC Danao explained the lengthy state process for projects including a 6% inflation adjustment which requires additional funding consideration during a period where 51% of our budget is allotted to our utilities due to increases. The design for the boiler is at 100% today and ready to go out for bid. Next steps are the bidding process. Other high priority projects include critical fire safety projects. DC Danao presented a Facility Capitalization Plan for 2022-2026.

C. Office of Advocacy & Assistance

OA&A manager, John Carragher reported working with Human Resources to fill staff vacancies due to staff turnover. A Veteran Services Supervisor and two new VSO's were hired and in place. Ongoing projects include the reorganization of cemetery files in preparation of the upcoming Federal VA cemetery assessment, work with Tyler Tech creating a case management database to track claims and provide empirical data, access for office assistants to view case in the federal PIV card system and leveraging funding in the DOL grant to finalize renovations to building 18 to house OA&A staff. Upcoming events include a Municipal Vet Rep training on 6/14, a ceremony is planned at the state cemetery in Middletown on June 7th for the Repatriated remains of a recently identified WWII Army Veteran from Normandy and Mr. Carragher will be attending the National Cemetery Leadership Conference on April 15 – 19th.

D. Legislative Update

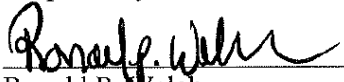
Manager of Community Advocacy, Ms. Jesshop reported that the DVA has not submitted bills for this session but has been tracking all bills related to Veterans and has been contacted by Legislators requesting information. One request was associated with SB 344 “An Act Concerning Federal Veterans’ Benefits and Income Eligibility Determinations for Certain Public Assistance Programs” regarding information on property tax exemptions for 100% Disabled Veterans and the fiscal impact on the state.

Closing

Commissioner Welch announced the retirement of Lesbia Nieves, Director of Residential Services effective July 1, 2024 and thanked her for her service and dedication to our Veterans.

There being no further business Commissioner Welch entertained a motion to adjourn which was accepted by Trustee Vogt, seconded by Trustee Barry and the meeting adjourned at 4:35 p.m. The next meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, July 10, 2024 at 3:30 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted:



Ronald P. Welch
DVA Commissioner

Date: April 17, 2024



**Department of Veterans Affairs
State of Connecticut**

**Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes
July 10, 2024**

(Minutes subject to review at next Board Meeting)

I. Convene Meeting:

The Meeting was held in the Building 50 Conference Room at the Department of Veterans Affairs located at 287 West Street, Rocky Hill, CT.

Trustees in attendance: Paul Barry, Phil Cacciola, Carlita Cotton, Tara Desjardins, Peter Galgano Jr., Adele Hodges, Professor Moore, Patrick Nelligan and Sherri Vogt.

Trustees attending via Teams: Stephen Harris, Shard Samy

Absent:, Juan Cruz, Richard Dzieken, Alyssa Kelleher, John Lawlor, Frederick Leaf, Heather Sandler and Michael Saylor.

DVA Staff in attendance: Commissioner Ronald P. Welch, Lori Conchado, Joseph Danao and Lindsay Jesshop.

Chair, Patrick Nelligan called the meeting to order at 3:34 p.m. and offered a motion to accept minutes for the April 10, 2024 meeting, which were accepted by Ms. Vogt and Mr. Barry.

Commissioner Welch began the meeting with an overview of CT Statute **Sec. 27-102n Board of Trustees for the Department of Veterans Affairs. Members. Duties. Annual report.** Commissioner explained state auditors reported reoccurring deficiencies in their review of the Board of Trustees 2021 and 2022 Annual Reports, which were not submitted due to staff changes. Commissioner clarified that his role is to participate as a non-voting member and prepare Quarterly Reports to trustees. The information gathered for quarterly reports are gathered from managers of each reporting area submitted to members for review. State auditors are now reviewing 2022 – 2023 and Commissioner has asked that they report findings as they are discovered so they may be addressed immediately.

Chair Nelligan will compile Annual Reports moving forward with information gathered from meeting minutes. Chair Nelligan stressed the importance of trustees roles as appointed members with expectations to be met and encouraged members to engage in the process. It was suggested that a joint meeting with Veteran Committee members and those who appointed members be invited to participate in a meeting.

The participation of trustees attending remotely versus in person was noted as a possible barrier in keeping trustees engaged. Trustee Samy was called upon by Chair Nelligan to speak on his opinion of the value of participating remotely. Mr. Samy agreed that in-person meetings are a better option and Teams is a good

alternative. Mr. Samy noted that his participation for all in person meetings would prevent him from participating due to his schedule and travel from Stamford and that he has learned a great deal about the DVA during meetings and feels it is a worthwhile commitment. He believes remote access is a necessary trade off and would agree that trustees should commit to participating in one in-person meeting per year.

Chair Nelligan reported there will be changes to membership due to absences and recommendations from trustees for new members will be considered. Trustees should consider committing to one or two of the following committees they are interested in participating in: Cemetery, Budget, Staffing, Admissions, Legislative, Advocacy and Projects as each will require 2-3 members.

Chair Nelligan would like trustees to share their position on the board while in the public and at events by wearing their new BOT nametags to identify them. In addition, each trustee's bio and picture will be added to the DVA website. Trustee Cotton stated that she identified as a trustee in her town and area and has worked with Representative Nolan, Veteran groups and VFW's to forge relationships in the community. Members were asked to share information on upcoming events with the group that members may attend to support our Veterans. Trustee Galgano announced an annual Middlesex Chamber Support the Troops Meeting and Breakfast on November 4th, where Commissioner Welch is scheduled to make remarks.

Trustee Barry voiced his concern over the decreasing population of WWII Veterans at a little over 11%; Vietnam Veterans at 4% of the population and how this could diminish future funding for Veterans both on and off campus. There is a need to share information on the DVA's four core missions to include the exceptional care provided at the Healthcare Center and opportunity for Veterans who may be interested in our Residential program.

Chair Nelligan noted the high quality of staff at the DVA with Veteran Services Officers (VSO's) being the best trained in the state. However, they have high case loads that are difficult to manage. The state statute requiring all 167 towns to have a Veteran Service Officer needs to be in compliance with having VSO's who are properly trained and interested in assisting Veterans to determine benefits and file claims. Trustee Cotton has successfully worked with her town to hire a VSO who is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. Ms. Cotton suggested information that could be shared with municipalities for guidance. Commissioner Welch stated the DVA is updating our website and will include links to information and links for Veterans to connect to their local VSO. Chair Nelligan would like to see clusters of Veteran groups rally for support as they have in the past to support our VSO's and gain support of state commanders to hire and maintain their roles.

Trustee Cacciola would like to determine the number of Veterans who need assistance through the Department of Labor. Chair Nelligan noted this could be done through the Department of Defense through their "Project Skill Ridge Program" which connects discharging service members with civilian work experiences with specific industries with training, apprenticeships and internships. The DVA's database of DD 214's and the State Library were other methods noted for possible gathering of information.

Former Commissioner and current have put a great deal of time into discussions with local town and state officials negotiating for the purchase of land required to expand our cemetery in Middletown. Trustees need to be well versed on the functions of the cemetery and share continually for public awareness.

Commissioner Welch is participating on committees and tracking suicide rates which are currently at 51 per day with many discussions on how to reduce this number.

Other initiatives noted were the possibility of Vet Piers attending meetings to present their success stories, trustees participating in evening meals with Veterans in the main dining room and a possible annual dinner with trustees and Veterans.

Closing

There being no further business Chair Nelligan entertained a motion to adjourn which was accepted by Trustee Vogt, seconded by Trustee Barry and the meeting adjourned at 5:14 p.m. The next meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, October 9, 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

Date: July 16, 2024



**Department of Veterans Affairs
State of Connecticut**

**Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes
October 9, 2024**

(Minutes subject to review at next Board Meeting)

I. Convene Meeting:

The Meeting was held in the Building 50 Conference Room at the Department of Veterans Affairs located at 287 West Street, Rocky Hill, CT.

Trustees in attendance: Phil Cacciola, Juan Cruz, Tara Desjardins, Richard Dzieken, Peter Galgano Jr., Adele Hodges, John Lawlor, Frederick Leaf, Professor Moore, Patrick Nelligan, Heather Sandler, Shard Samy and Sherri Vogt

Trustees attending via Teams: Carlita Cotton, Stephen Harris and Alyssa Kelleher

Absent:, Paul Barry and Michael Saylor

DVA Staff in attendance: Commissioner Ronald P. Welch, Lori Conchado, Joseph Danao, Lindsay Jesshop and Renee Gorr

Chair, Patrick Nelligan called the meeting to order at 3:40 p.m. and offered a motion to accept minutes for the July 10, 2024 meeting, which were accepted by Ms. Vogt and Mr. Lawlor.

Commissioner Welch introduced Renee Gorr the new Director of Residential Services. Ms. Gorr has an extensive background in Public Health, Behavioral Services and Communications.

DVA Executive Managers met with Office of Policy and Management Secretary, Jeffrey Beckham and staff to brief on our 4 Core Missions and discuss the DVA's lack of budget increases dating back to 2016. The OPM visit ended with a tour of the DVA campus.

Many ceremonies were held across the state honoring our Veterans to include weekly events with Lt. Governor Bysiewicz, celebrations for two WWII Veterans to commemorate landmark birthdays, an Iraq & Afghan Ceremony in Norwich, several 911 ceremonies, Manchester and Bridgeport "Wall That Heals" ceremonies and an Honor Flight and TAG 146th Freedom Salute Reintegration and Send-off ceremony. The department was very busy participating in a DOT podcast and Nutmeg Studio interview to provide information on the 2024 Stand Down event, a podcast with Attorney General Tong, Consumer Protection Commissioner Cafferelli and Adjutant General Evon to discuss and warn Veterans of on-going scams. A Press Conference with WTIC and WTNH was held on campus to announce the AARPA Housing project to expand housing for Veterans on campus. Commissioner continues to attend bi-weekly meetings and conferences with the National Association of State Directors of Veteran Affairs and counterparts to discuss important state and national issues and policies affecting our veterans and families.

II. Old/Ongoing Business

The Office of Advocacy & Assistance has re-initiated meetings with State Commanders to share information and discuss issues affecting Veterans.

Upcoming events include an Unclaimed Remains Ceremony on October 16th, Veterans Day events across the state and at the Connecticut Veterans Cemetery in Middletown at 2:00 p.m. on November 11th and the Annual Hall of Fame Ceremony scheduled for January 23, 2025.

Deputy Commissioner Danao presented on behalf of Fiscal Services reporting the department is on target with our budget with utilities continuing to be a large portion of our budget.

Deputy Commissioner Danao reported on current projects to include the \$5M AARPA project which will expand housing. Bids for renovations are out with a Pre-bid meeting scheduled on 10/16 and a closing date of 10/30/24. The contract must be in hand by 12/21/24. There will be eleven family housing units and 18 individual beds added. A large Solar Project is in initial stages with plans to install panels which will power 85% of the (HCC) Healthcare Center's utility needs. The department has received funds to support the replacement of a call bell system in the HCC and for the roofing project which will go out to bid next month. We are waiting on a contract for the Electronic Health Record system. The camera project is 99.9% completed and the lighting replacement project has replaced 83,000 light bulbs across the campus.

Office of Advocacy & Assistance Manager, John Carragher reported 11 of 12 positions are currently filled with Veteran Service Officers handling 9,685 claims annually, producing 15.7M in benefits to Veterans with 562 claims submitted for this quarter. The division continues to work on a large project to update and archive cemetery files and completed an audit conducted by the National Cemetery Association with few issues noted and corrections made as required. Renovations to Building 18, which will house a Veteran Services Support Center continue. Trustee Vogt asked if there has been an increase in requests for Power of Attorney due to expansion of the PACT Act. Mr. Carragher confirmed there has been an increase in requests.

Manager of Community Advocacy, Lindsay Jesshop provided an update on legislation effecting Veterans to include:

- Public Act 24-46; effective 10/1; Property Tax Exemption for Veterans with Permanent and Total Disability Rating
- Public Act 24-119; effective 10/1; Veteran License Plates and Designation for Certain Reservists

There has been a great deal of confusion regarding Public Act 24-46 as the language is not clear to some and Veterans are receiving denial letters from Municipalities. The onus lies on the 174 municipalities who work independently and shoulder the financial burden. The percentage of the disability is not important; the designation of the disability as a yes or no by the Federal VA is key. Trustees noted several instances where there are inconsistencies in what towns consider as an acceptable DD 214 for their records. Some require them to be notarized or certified. Also noted was the value of taxes for the exemption which are only for dwelling and does not include the land. The DVA will continue to review and support Veterans concerns regarding this legislation.

Public Act 24-119 expands the eligibility for Veteran License Plates to now include reservists. There has been talk of a possible amendment in the upcoming session.

Commissioner Welch shared information on a survey that rated Connecticut Veteran services low compared to other states. He has a meeting with a group to discuss the survey and how the information was determined. Trustee Hodges believes this may be connected to younger Veterans who are not aware of or not participating in services available to them. Chair Nelligan encouraged all trustees to connect with Rally Point on LinkedIn for Military personnel as an excellent resource to connect.

Additionally, Commissioner reported that the DVA census for both Residential and the Healthcare Center have increased and are near capacity. Our Residential facility has 11 open beds (5 male/6 female) and the HCC has 4 open beds and a few reserved for isolation if needed.

Chair Nelligan asked that trustees consider participating in 1 of the 6 Committees:

- Public Relations, Advocacy and Legislation
- Housing & Fees (specific to DVA campus)
- Healthcare
- Municipal Vet Reps & Veteran Organizations
- Fiscal
- Website update to include trustee photos and bio's – *Trustee Sandler accepted and will initiate an email to members to submit information*


Chair Nelligan called on Trustee Vogt to report on Wreaths Across American. Ms. Vogt reported we need approximately 13,000 wreaths. WAA is currently offering a buy two get one free promotion. Ms. Vogt will forward the link to all members.

Meeting dates for 2025 were tabled to discuss at the December meeting.

Closing

There being no further business Chair Nelligan entertained a motion to adjourn which was accepted by and by all Trustees and the meeting adjourned at 4:57 p.m. The next meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, December 11, 2024, which will be holiday themed with more info to follow.

Respectfully Submitted:


Patrick Nelligan
Chair

Date: October 15, 2024