



**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 146<sup>th</sup> 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 16<sup>th</sup>, Veterans Day events across the state and at the Connecticut Veterans Cemetery in Middletown at 2:00 p.m. on November 11<sup>th</sup> 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