

Connecticut Department of Veterans Affairs



Board of Trustees Annual Report for 2023

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 of Trustees acknowledges the late submission of this report. The Board was unable to complete the report timely due in part to changes in staff at the DVA, which impacted the Board's ability to coordinate detailed review of updates, as well as the transition to the appointment of a new DVA Commissioner in 2023.

The Board fulfilled its duties during 2023 through active engagement in the oversight of DVA operations, programmatic and policy updates at the DVA with in-person meetings, Campus tours and briefings by Commissioner Welch and senior staff members. The Board continues to work with the DVA to address the need for additional land at the State Veterans Cemetery in Middletown which will be expected to run out of burial space to remain in compliance with the federal VA by 2027. Collaboration and communication between the Board and Commissioner Welch supports a dynamic approach to addressing issues and overcoming challenges with new approaches that improve the delivery of programs and services to Veterans. It is an honor to lead the Board of Trustees in service to Veterans across the State of Connecticut.

Respectfully Submitted,

Patrick Nelligan

Chairperson

Veteran, United States Army

DVA Board of Trustees Annual Report for 2023

Introduction

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 2023 the Board has fulfilled its statutory mission through active engagement with the DVA leadership and oversight of DVA operations, policies and programs. This past year is not unique but 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.

Organizationally, this report summarizes the Board's activities and provides recommendations for each of the DVA's four core functions, addresses whether the DVA implemented previous recommendations and concludes with general recommendations for the DVA overall.

Board Activities and Recommendations for DVA Core Functions

I. Residential Programs and Services

a. Board Activities

- i. In 2023, the Board convened a subcommittee to review the Residential Facility Program Fee. Subcommittee did not recommend any changes at this time. The Board voted unanimously to keep current fee structure in place.
- ii. There were no new recommended Residential Programs activities from the board for this calendar year.

a. Implementation of Prior Recommendations:

- i. The recommended construction of a pavilion in the center quad area was completed to allow for greater use of the space by Veteran Residents for outdoor activities.
- ii. Trustee Sami, Board Program Fee subcommittee chair, recommended keeping the current fee structure for the resident program. The board voted unanimously to approve this recommendation.
- iii. The recommendation to review Patriots Landing for expanded use is noted and tabled to be reviewed pending resource constraints.

II. Healthcare Center

- a. **Board Activities:** There were no new activities focused on the Healthcare Center for this report.

- b. **Implementation of Prior Recommendations:** There were two major recommendations of the Board in its report issued in 2022 and the DVA has successfully achieved each as follows:

- i. The existing HCC 300-Kilowatt emergency generator issue remains as an outstanding project for which the DVA is still seeking a bonding match for a Federal VA grant.
- ii. The recommendation to offer short term rehabilitative services covered by Medicaid was implemented by the DVA.

- c. **New Recommendations:** There are no new recommendations for the Healthcare Center for this report.

III. Office of Advocacy and Assistance

- a. **Board activities:** There were no new board activities focused on OAA for this calendar year.

- b. **Implementation of Prior Recommendations:**

There were no recommendations from the board for OAA for this calendar year.

IV. Cemetery and Memorial Services

- a. **Board activities:** There were no new recommendations regarding Cemetery and Memorial Services on behalf of the board.
- b. **Implementation of Prior Recommendations:** There were three major recommendations of the Board in its report issued in 2022 which the DVA has addressed as follows:
 - i. The recommendation to consolidate Cemetery and Memorial Services at Middletown remains an open recommendation.
 - ii. The recommendation to seek additional land (public or private) for a cemetery expansion remains an open recommendation.
 - iii. The recommendation to construct a permanent Committal Shelter remains an open recommendation.
- c. **Recommendations:** There were no new recommendations for Cemetery and Memorial but to continue to seek land for future cemetery services.

V. General Recommendations

In addition to specific core function recommendations above, the Board has no new general recommendations for this calendar year.

VI. Board Minutes

Attached hereto are the minutes from each Board's meeting during 2023.

Department of Veterans Affairs Board of Trustees

Meeting Minutes for meetings held during 2023 Calendar Year:

- **March 8, 2023**
- **June 7, 2023**
- **September 13, 2023**
- **December 13, 2023**



**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



**Department of Veterans Affairs
State of Connecticut**

**Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes
June 7, 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 3:34 p.m.

Trustees in attendance: Richard Adgers, John Banks, Paul Barry, Phil Cacciola, Carlita Cotton, Peter Galgano Jr., Steven M. Harris, Adele Hodges, Alyssa Kelleher, Frederick Leaf, Patrick Nelligan, Sharad Samy, Heather Sandler and Sherri Vogt.

Absent: Juan Cruz, Richard Dzeikan, John Lawlor

DVA Staff in attendance: Commissioner Ronald P. Welch, Lori Conchado, Joseph Danao, Briana Mitchell

Chair, Patrick Nelligan called the meeting to order at 3:34 p.m. and entertained a motion to approve the minutes of the previous meeting which were accepted by Trustee Leaf and seconded by Trustee Harris. The minutes were passed unanimously without any corrections or edits.

Chair Nelligan introduced and welcomed newly appointed Commissioner Ronald P. Welch to the group. Commissioner Welch comes to the DVA from Easter Seals Rally Point in Eastern Connecticut, a nonprofit organization that provides expanded access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities for those with disabilities and the veteran population. Commissioner Welch retired in 2014 as a Brigadier General. Commissioner thanked the group for their work and looks forward to working with them to continue moving initiatives forward.

Chair Nelligan introduced the DVA's new Manager of Community Advocacy, Lindsay Jesshop. Ms. Jesshop previously worked for the state's long term Ombudsman's Office where she advocated for individuals in nursing homes, assisted living facilities and residential care homes. Ms. Lindsay is and looking forward to working with our Veterans in her new position.

Deputy Commissioner Danao asked Ms. Jesshop to report DVA events for the period of January – March 2023. Ms. Jesshop reported former Commissioner Saadi held several Meet & Greet sessions to celebrate the contributions of staff for Women's History Month, honored a DVA WWII Veteran by presenting him with the Connecticut Wartime Service Medal and participated in the Southington Veterans Coffeehouse held in conjunction with Representative Poulos to meet with over 80 Veterans for a question-and-answer session on available benefits. The department held a Ribbon Cutting ceremony on March 28, 2023 to celebrate the opening of the new Office of Advocacy & Assistance District Office in the Bigelow Center for Senior activities in Fairfield.

A Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Ceremony has held in the Gold Star Families Memorial Auditorium to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the withdrawal of all U.S. ground combat forces from Vietnam and honor those who served. The event was well attended by Veterans and family members, Veteran organizations, and state officials. Additional events honoring Veterans include the celebration of a WWII Veterans 100th birthday where he was presented with a special recognition from the FBI for being the oldest living graduate of the FBI Academy and awarded a Connecticut Wartime Service Medal for his service. Ceremonies were held both on campus and at the State of Connecticut Veterans Cemetery in Middletown over the Memorial Day weekend to honor and remember those who have served.

Outreach events included a visit by “Augie” the water buffalo, who visited with Veterans and participated in a presentation from a student attending the Northwestern Regional School’s agricultural program, the Cummins Inc. employees who volunteered their manpower for their second year on campus weeding and planning flowers at the Healthcare Center and DVA Veteran Lion’s Club members efforts in planting and mulching around the Returned Soldiers Memorial. Veteran Service Officers Paul Spedalieri, Jeannie Gardner and Devon Julien participated in events at the Montville Senior Center and at the 1st Annual Veterans Military Resource Fair held at the Legislative Office building.

Upcoming events include a Municipal Veteran Representatives Training on June 9th, a ceremony to present Corporal Dorothy “Dottie” Dee the Women’s Military Memorial “Living Legend Award” and the Connecticut DVA and Federal VA Resource Fair on June 24, 2023.

Deputy Commissioner Danao provided an alibi announcing updates to a house bill adding \$37,000 to the budget to cover the required cost of staff meals per contract and a house bill proposing an increase in the number of Veteran Service Officers for the Office of Advocacy & Assistance.

II. Old/Ongoing Business

A. Fiscal Report

Director of Fiscal Services, Ms. Briana Mitchell reported the DVA’s 3rd Quarter budget is robust and will end the year with a surplus. OEM expenses were extremely tight due primarily to unforeseen expenses in increased utility costs. A request has been made to OPM for a transfer of funds to ensure payments for utility costs. The department released its 1st, 2nd and 3rd quarter allotments on time and received an advanced allotment to cover 3rd quarter expenditures.

Trustee Adgers inquired as to the status of the Residential sub-committee’s recommendation on a new fee structure. Chair Nelligan, through Ms. Conchado confirmed the discussion is ongoing with a meeting scheduled for June 14, 2023 with a presentation to the board at the next meeting.

B. Projects & Operations Report

Deputy Commissioner Danao reported the boiler project is moving forward with plans to install two new boilers. Trustee Barry inquired what is delaying us from completing this project and Deputy Commissioner Danao explained the department had to acquire the funds and work through planning stages with several state agencies.

The department has \$500,00 for capital repairs for the roof at the Healthcare Center and repair of the existing water tower which is in the concept phase. A project to upgrade our security system includes a new gate house and cameras which is in the design stage. Trustee Vogt inquired whether replacement of call bells at the Healthcare Center was on our radar, whether we were cited during our recent inspection and if any

residents have been injured. Deputy Commissioner Danao confirmed we were not cited and are being proactive in working with contractors and no residents have been injured.

C. Cemetery Property Acquisitions

Deputy Commissioner Danao reported he has a meeting with DAS on June 8, 2023 to further discuss bonding funds to purchase additional land for the state cemetery in Middletown. Information from this meeting could be utilized to apply for the Federal VA's first round of cemetery pre-application grants that are due on July 1, 2023.

D. Residential Program Fee Update

Chair Nelligan called on Trustee Samy, the chair of the Residential Fee sub-committee to provide a brief update on the groups progress. Mr. Samy reported the committee members have met and are working on a fee analysis provided by former Commissioner Saadi. The group is looking at ways to make the fee structure more equitable in terms of income and impact on Veterans. A follow-up meeting is scheduled for June 14, 2023.

III. New Business

A. Wreaths Across America

Trustee Vogt announced the first of two upcoming concerts to be held at Crystal Bee's in Southington to raise funds for WAA. The last fundraiser held there sold approximately 200 tickets with a donation of \$2030 to the Perpetual Care Fund. Trustee Vogt is calling on board members to assist with getting the word out and selling tickets to double numbers for the upcoming shows. Posters and tickets will be made and shared with members for the September 15, 2023 event. This event will help to offset an increase in the price of wreaths which are going to be \$17.00 each this year. Our goal for this year is to provide a wreath for each deceased Veteran. Trustee Vogt would also like to branch out to towns in the northeastern part of the state for fundraising support. Trustee Adgers offered his assistance in planning future events as he has 25+ years experience.

Closing

Chair, Patrick Nelligan announced Brigadier General and Trustee John Lawlor accepted the Vice-Chair position. With the recent appointment of Commissioner Welch, the board now has two Brigadier General's and one Chief Warrant Officer 5 on board.

There being no further business Chair Nelligan entertained a motion to adjourn which was accepted by Trustee Adgers, seconded by Trustee Leaf and the meeting adjourned at 4:48 p.m. The next meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, September 13th, at 3:30 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted:



Patrick Nelligan, Chair
DVA Board of Trustees

Date July 3, 2023



**Department of Veterans Affairs
State of Connecticut**

**Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes
September 13, 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 3:36 p.m.

Trustees in attendance: Richard Adgers, John Banks, Paul Barry, Phil Cacciola, Carlita Cotton, Juan Cruz, Peter Galgano Jr., Adele Hodges, Patrick Nelligan, Sharad Samy, Heather Sandler and Sherri Vogt.

Absent: Richard Dzeikan, Steven Harris, Alyssa Kelleher, John Lawlor and Fredereick Leaf.

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

Chair, Patrick Nelligan called the meeting to order at 3:36 p.m. and entertained a motion to approve the minutes of the previous meeting which were accepted by Trustee Vogt and seconded by Trustee Galgano. The minutes were passed unanimously without any corrections or edits.

Manager of Community Advocacy, Lindsay Jesshop provided an overview of DVA achievements for the past quarter to include a well-attended Veterans Rep training, two PACT Act events assisting over 1,000 Veterans in processing claims, the start of construction on a large Pavilion on campus made possible through a private donation, Press Conferences with Attorney General Tong regarding military scams and with Senator Blumenthal to announce a Veteran Farmers Grant Program. Radio interviews included WINY and CRIS radio to discuss the PACT Act and DVA's 4 core missions. Other notable events included a large gathering held at the DVA Gold Star Families Auditorium honoring Corporal Dorothy "Dottie" Dee for her nomination for the Living Legend Award and two Wartime Service Medals presented to Army Air Corps. Sergeant Ludwig "Sam" Garh on his 105th birthday and Navy Veteran David Parkinson on his 100th birthday.

Upcoming events include a Board of Trustees fundraiser "Rock 4 Vets", Cigna and Saluting Branches on campus to volunteer their services landscaping and performing tree work, Stand Down, Residential Veterans trip to DC, Unclaimed Cremains, the town of Rocky Hill's Road Race and Wreaths Across America.

II. Old/Ongoing Business

A. Fiscal Report

Director of Fiscal Services, Ms. Briana Mitchell presented the DVA's 4th Quarter budget which is on track for the year end. Expenditures continue to be closely monitored by fiscal staff to meet the increasing budget needs and maintain funding to support our Veterans.

B. Projects & Operations Report

Deputy Commissioner Danao provided an overview of ongoing projects to include the construction phase of the Pavilion, ongoing work to renovate Building #18 across from the DVA campus and HCC's call bell system and upgrades to replace the existing gatehouse, add cameras and mass notification system, which are in the design stage. A major energy efficiency initiative funded by DEEP in conjunction with CT Green Bank Solar Field Installation is scheduled for replacement of lighting throughout the campus.

C. Cemetery Property Acquisitions

Deputy Commissioner Danao reported 3 million dollars in bonding was requested to support the expansion of the cemetery property and Commissioner will participate in a bond meeting at the end of the month. All options to expand or establish a new cemetery are still under consideration. The DVA continues to look at options to expand our capacity long term.

D. Office of Advocacy & Assistance

OA&A manager, John Carragher reported the unit generates \$125 million annually to the Connecticut economy through claims Veteran Service Officers submitted to the Federal VA with 8,269 total claims submitted by 11 VSO's serving our Veterans statewide. Legislative support for the 2023 session was successful in increasing the minimum number of VSO's by adding two additional positions and a supervisor to focus on supervising, providing training to Municipal Vet Representatives and provide services to Residential and HCC residents. Renovations to a building adjacent to the main campus to house the new supervisor, staff and training room is in process and near completion.

A total of 1,026 PACT Act related claims were filed on behalf of 915 individuals with 568 complete and 458 pending. The workload to process claims remains high as there is not deadline date for submission. Post 9/11 Veteran demographics continue to be a challenge.

The new case management system went live on September 1, 2023 with most data having been migrated from the Federal VA. The system has improved accuracy and efficiency in filing claims.

E. Residential Programs

Director Nieves presented an overview of an upcoming Veteran resident trip to Washington DC on October 20 – 23, 2023. Reservations have been made for 26 Veterans and 4 staff members to travel via bus to visit several venues. Trustees are encouraged to reach out to Director Nieves if interested in traveling with the group.

F. Residential Fee Program Update

Trustee Samy, the chair of the Residential Fee sub-committee reported the members reviewed data on fee analysis dating back to 2016 and determined they did not feel changes are needed at this time. Chair Nelligan

put forward a motion to maintain the Residential Fee Structure with no change. The board voted unanimously to keep the current fee structure in place.

Closing

Chair, Patrick Nelligan asked that the Stand Down locations and information be shared with members and encouraged members to attend and support the Stand Down, Rock 4 Vets and Wreaths Across America initiatives.

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 4:45 p.m. The next meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, December 13th, at 3:30 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'P. Nelligan', is written over a horizontal line.

Patrick Nelligan, Chair
DVA Board of Trustees

Date November 8, 2023



**Department of Veterans Affairs
State of Connecticut**

**Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes
December 13, 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.

Trustees in attendance: Richard Adgers, John Banks, Paul Barry, Phil Cacciola, Carlita Cotton, Richard Dzieken, Peter Galgano Jr., Richard Harris, Adele Hodges, Frederick Leaf, John Lawlor, Patrick Nelligan and Sharad Samy,

Absent: Alyssa Kelleher, Heather Sandler and Sherri Vogt.

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

Chair, Patrick Nelligan called the meeting to order at 3:27 p.m. with a quorum in place and with the approval of members he entertained a motion to approve the minutes of the previous meeting which were accepted by Trustee Lawlor and seconded by Trustee Hodges. The minutes were passed unanimously without any corrections or edits.

Commissioner Welch provided an overview of Veteran events held throughout the state during the past quarter attended by Commissioner or designees to include several ceremonies honoring Vietnam and Korean War Veterans in conjunction with Lieutenant Governor Bysiewicz, Veteran milestone birthday celebrations, Veteran Coffeehouses, meetings with several Senators to discuss the upcoming legislative session an Unclaimed Cremains Ceremony and Hispanic Heritage celebrations. Commissioner Welch participated in several radio interviews and the department's first podcast to provide information on benefits available to our Veterans.

The 2024 Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony has been scheduled for January 25, 2024 beginning at 5:00 p.m. in the DVA's Gold Star Families Memorial Auditorium. Application packages are in the final stage of review with letters to nominators and applicants expected to be out this week. Trustee Lawlor inquired whether any DVA residents were being considered to which Commissioner responded noting we did not receive applications for any residents.

The Assumption of Duties Ceremony for Dr. Becky Rhoads, Executive Director for the VA Connecticut Healthcare System was held at the DVA's Gold Star Memorial Auditorium on November 30th. The DVA is looking forward to collaborating with Dr. Rhoades and staff to support our Veterans and negotiate changes in medical reimbursements that are expected to cost approximately \$180,000 per year.

II. Old/Ongoing Business

A. Residential Programs

Residential Director Lesbia Nieves reported a successful Stand Down event was held on 9/22/23 at five locations throughout the state with over 900 Veterans participating. Other notable events for the quarter include a Hispanic History Month ceremony, Veterans Day Ceremony and a Ribbon Cutting for the newly built Pavilion on campus. Twenty-six Residential Veterans and staff participated in a 3-day trip to Washington DC visiting several locations of interest. The American Auxiliary Christmas shopping party held over four days was made possible by the generous donations and volunteer's time to provide gifts to Veterans. The 102nd Army Band held a Holiday Concert in the DVA Gold Star Families Auditorium with over 125 Veterans, family members and staff in attendance.

B. Healthcare Center

Commissioner provided a brief overview of the Healthcare Center noting an unannounced inspection by the Federal VA of the Residential program and Healthcare Center which resulted in positive feedback reported. DVA staff continues to work on the Corrective Action Plan (CAP) for a prior Federal VA inspection. Eighteen Veterans were presented with a Quilt of Valor during a ceremony held at the Healthcare Center.

C. Fiscal Report

Director of Fiscal Services, Ms. Briana Mitchell presented the DVA is closing out the 2020/21 budget and looking closely at the 2026/27 Biennial budget which is expected to be tight due to increasing operating and FTE costs. The DVA must compile FTE costs for reporting to OPM by March 2024 for the next fiscal year's forecasting. Chair Nelligan asked that the DVA reach out to Trustees if support is needed and suggested a sub-committee be created to review and support this initiative.

D. Deputy Commissioner Report

Deputy Commissioner Danao provide a brief overview of his role in supporting the department in onboarding a new Customer Service manager, support for DVA events and several inspections conducted on campus. The DVA is also expecting an unannounced inspection by the Connecticut Department of Public Health. The current count of Residential Veterans is reported at 111 and 83 at the HCC.

E. Cemetery Property Acquisitions

In response to Trustee Barry's request for an update on the cemetery acquisition, Commissioner reported that he is working with state officials who are diligently attempting to negotiate the purchase of additional land. The DVA is on the Bond Commission's agenda on 12/8 requesting \$3 million for the purchase of land.

F. Office of Advocacy & Assistance

OA&A Manager, John Carragher reported the unit generated approximately \$125 million in benefit payments to our Connecticut Veterans through claims made to the Federal VA by our Veteran Service Officers. The office is expecting to onboard two new staff members: a Veteran Service Supervisor in January and an Office Assistant in February 2024. The department is working on building access for training, resources and outreach opportunities to better support our Veterans. The office is also preparing for a Cemetery Grant Assessment due in August 2024. The department is currently doing all we can to maximize burial space and will need to excavate for crypt placement space for burial of cremains.

G. Office of Community Advocacy

Manager of Community Advocacy, Lindsay Jesshop reported a large number of monetary donations and gift cards were received during this quarter to support our Veterans and the department is working on revisions to our donation policy. Several successful events were held to include our annual Stand Down, Hispanic History Month celebration, Rocky Hill Run, Off Road Jeepers and an Unclaimed Cremains Ceremony laying six Veterans to rest at the Connecticut Veterans Cemetery in Middletown. Upcoming events include the Wreaths Across America Ceremony on December 16th and Hall of Fame ceremony scheduled for January 25, 2024 in the DVA's Gold Star Families Memorial Auditorium.

The office was busy making arrangements for the department's first podcast, meeting with legislators and attending Coffeehouses to build community relationships with Veterans and organizations. Reworking the Volunteer Program and Handbook will be a focus in 2024.

John Carragher reported we will be placing wreaths on all headstones at the Middletown Cemetery and approximately 50% of those at the Gates Cemetery in Rocky Hill for the ceremonies on December 16th.

H. Trustee Suggestions for 2024

Chair Nelligan tabled this item for the next scheduled meeting to allow all members to submit suggestions to Lori Conchado.

Closing

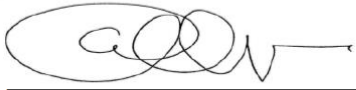
Chair, Patrick Nelligan is honored to have been appointed and serve on the board since 2016 and is honored to work with this committed group.

Commissioner asked trustees to reach out if they have any specific information they would like presented at our next meeting.

Meetings for 2024 were set for March 13th, June 12th, September 18th and December 11th.

There being no further business Chair Nelligan entertained a motion to adjourn which was accepted by Trustee Hodges, seconded by Trustee Adgers and the meeting adjourned at 5:01 p.m. The next meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, March 13, 2024 at 3:30 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G. Nelligan', written over a horizontal line.

Patrick Nelligan, Chair
DVA Board of Trustees

Date December 20, 2023