

**GINO J. MERLI VETERANS' CENTER
ADVISORY COUNCIL MEETING
August 18, 2022**

CALL TO ORDER

Travis Davis, Executive Director, called the meeting to order at 10:00 a.m.

ROLL CALL

Secretary Bernie McDonald excused, roll call bypassed.

MEMBERS

Lisa Solarczyk, President - Marine Corps League (Excused)
William Smith, Vice President - The American Legion (Virtual)
Bernard "Bernie" McDonald, Secretary – AMVETS (Excused)
Robert Cudworth - Military Officers Association of America
Robert Smith - Military Order of the Purple Heart (Excused)
Russell Canevari - Veterans of Foreign Wars
Richard Green - Blinded Veterans Association
Joe Sylvester - Disabled American Veterans (Excused)
Lisa Baker - PA State Senate (Excused)
Carol Sweeney for Karen Boback - PA House of Representatives
Tim Cleveland – PSACDVA (Excused)
Lisa Kaye – PSACDVA (Virtual)
Wilson Miller - GJMVC Resident Representative

DMVA

Major General Mark J. Schindler - Adjutant General, Pennsylvania (Excused)
Maureen Weigl, BG - Deputy Adjutant General, VA (Excused)
Travis Davis – Executive Director, Long-Term Care
Barbara Raymond – Director, Bureau of Veterans' Homes
Vito P. Ruggiero - GJMVC Commandant
Kathleen Ambrose - GJMVC Deputy Commandant

OTHERS PRESENT / INTRODUCTION OF GUESTS

Lynn O'Day, Recorder
Daniel Kazmierski, Medical Director
Sara Butler, Admissions
Jan McAllister, Volunteers
Dantie Brooks, Regional Compliance Officer
Margaret Thompson, QA (Virtual)

MOMENT OF SILENCE

REVIEW OF PREVIOUS MINUTES

- Previous minutes accepted as written.
Motioned by Russell Canevari and Richard Green.

- **REPORT OF THE MEDICAL DIRECTOR**

- Daniel Kazmierski reported that COVID is still dominating the news. We are having in-person meetings not so much because the transmission rates are down but because most people are vaccinated. We have had 52 residents positive for covid year to date and most of those were earlier in the year. We have had 4 resident deaths. Our last positive resident was on June 9th.
- We are trying to get all our residents up to date on their vaccines which is the 2 original vaccines and 2 boosters. We have 131 out of 137 residents who are up to date. There are 6 residents who are not up to date.
- We have 85 staff positive for this year so far and no staff deaths. Our last staff positive was 8/10/22. We are very proactive with any positive staff; they are immediately sent home. We have a protocol that we follow for allowing them to come back including retesting, following symptoms and things of that nature.
- We have 214 staff up to date with the vaccine and 98 are not. This does not mean that they do not have any vaccines, just that they do not have all the vaccines required for an up-to-date status (2 original shots with 1 booster or 2 boosters over 50 years old).
- We are continuing to have vaccine clinics weekly for not only residents and employees but also families of all. It has been a very successful program.
- We will have FLU vaccines available September 15th.
- We are seeing high transmissible rates and high rates of contracting COVID, but we are clearly seeing less lethality and less powerful symptoms. We still must remain vigilant about it especially among our vulnerable populations.
- We are continuing our efforts of trying to avert physical and or verbal altercations among our residents. We had some bad resident to resident interactions in the past so we are trying to be proactive.
- We've been trying to transition all of our diabetic residents who are getting finger sticks to the Dexcom or Free Style system. Once we have the transition complete, we can monitor their sugars without having to stick their fingers.
- The VA discontinued primary care visits. Previously, if anyone needed specialists, they had to see a primary care physician at the VA for a referral. They no longer need to do this.
- We continue our efforts for gradual dose reductions for antipsychotic, antidepressant and antianxiety medications.
- We continue to try and minimize foley catheters to help minimize urinary tract infections.
- We continue to try and minimize the use of antibiotics throughout the facility.
 - Russell asked what happens when someone refuses to get the vaccine.
 - Dr. Kazmierski stated that we have very few and it is their right. We will undertake isolation precautions should there be an outbreak. We will move them to another unit. We only have 6 that are not up to date out of 137 residents. They all have some level of the vaccines, so they are not completely unprotected.
 - Travis stated that Gino Merli has been the leader of vaccination rates since early on. One of the reasons why is education, they did a great job educating staff, family and residents helping them overcome their fears.

REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF LONG-TERM CARE

- Travis Davis reported that General Weigl is traveling but asked him to thank all the council members for their dedication and for volunteering to serve our veterans. She said that she will be here for the next meeting.
- Travis formally introduced himself to the council. He joined DMVA about a year and a half ago. He is from Scranton and spent the last 7 years at Allied Services. It is a privilege to work with the veterans here at Gino Merli. Having veterans in his family, he knows the reputation of this place and he is really impressed with the team.
- The governor's budget passed in July. This year there was over a 500-million-dollar investment in long term care. This is the first time in well over a decade, that long term care has been a priority. 190 million is going toward retention bonuses, professional development, and recruitment efforts. This is important as our biggest challenge right now is getting employees in the door. We have a lot of vacant beds in our homes and a lot of people on our wait lists. The challenge we have is having the staff to fill all the beds. A big portion is going towards Medicaid is getting a 20% increase which will impact us to some degree but more so the private industry.
- Department of Health is proposing to increase the minimum staffing requirements. For many years we have been at a 2.7 minimum requirement, and they want to increase it to a 4.1 which is a substantial jump. At this time all our homes average around a 4.0 so we are in a pretty good position if that were to happen but DOH has met with advocacy groups and has agreed to a 3.2. Year one they will move into a 2.87 and then to a 3.2. Our goal is to staff above that and keep a minimum of a 3.8.
- Census across the homes is 962. We have a compliment of about 1500 beds, so we are around 65% occupancy. We are growing in all 6 of our homes. We are a bit landlocked in 2 of our homes due to construction and some occupancy surveys.
- Gino Merli and Southeastern has bumped up to a 4-star rating. Hollidaysburg and Southwest are at 3 stars and Erie and Delaware Valley are at 5 stars. We are pleased with those results.
- Recruitment is a priority, and we have a statewide campaign going on. We are working closely with the governor's office and the office of administration on being unique in competing with the private industry. We have had some speed bumps to overcome with delays in posting, it still takes a while for us to get an employee in the door and people aren't waiting.
- There is a new federal bill signed by President Biden called Build America by America. This bill basically states that if you receive any federal dollars for construction, your materials must be purchased within the United States. Right now, we have a big construction plan set for Hollidaysburg where we are replacing one of the buildings with a new 200 bed home. When we ran the numbers for purchasing in the United States it drove up the cost 29%. We are going to apply for a waiver through the federal VA to get around this new law but going forward we are going to have to start planning far in advance.

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF VETERANS' HOMES

- Barbara Raymond introduced herself to the council. She stated that she had been the commandant of Erie for the past 12 years.

- Currently we have a COVID outbreak at 2 of our facilities. We have a small outbreak of 6 residents at our Southeast facility and we have 2 residents at our Hollidaysburg facility. All those residents are currently stable. We are using Paxlovid in several of our facilities including the individuals at our Southeast facility, however they were still positive. We did have an outbreak at our Delaware Valley facility however all those individuals are currently out of isolation.
- We have had 14 deaths since January of this year with the 2 most recent at Southeast.
- We are gearing up for the CMS phase 3 regulations. Regulations came out prior to COVID however the surveyors were not surveying on these regulations.
- We are paying attention to our quality measures. Five-star ratings are heavily dependent upon the quality measures which are how you can show that you are taking care of an individual.
- Hollidaysburg, Southwest, and Delaware Valley have had their recent VA surveys. Southwest also had their annual Department of Health survey. They have all done a very good job. We get looked at for hundreds of potential violations and for our facilities to have an average of 3 to 4 deficiencies out of hundreds is a tremendous accomplishment.
- Several directors of nursing are floating across the state in various areas. Maria Coles has been filling in while Andrew is carrying a role in Southwest.
- We now have all our 6 commandants in place across the homes.
- We want to have a 3.8 PPD. Currently it is 2.7 which means there is 2.7 hours per patient, per day for a 100-bed facility would equal 270 hours of patient care. With the current staffing crisis, we would have a serious challenge to go to a 4.1. Currently we are budgeted at a 3.8.
- We understand our veteran population is a bit different from the private sector. We tend to have more males, more altercations, more falls with injury, more urinary type issues and we are thankful to be able to budget ourselves at that higher staffing number.
- We are looking at the statuses of the council members, making sure we have all the proper paperwork in place.
 - Russell Canevari asked for clarification of the 2.7 and Barbara stated that we must have 2.7 hours of care, per patient, per day. Russell then asked if we have the staff to accommodate the hours and Barbara stated that is the problem. It is a very serious problem that we are facing across the country. Nursing and healthcare staff are leaving because they are tired and fatigued. COVID was extraordinarily devastating to our healthcare system.
 - Robert Cudworth asked if we are at a 3.8 right now. We are close but our census is also down. We are not sacrificing the care for a full census. We have been keeping our census low on purpose so that we can maintain the patient care hours. That is what has caused the long wait lists in some areas.

REPORT OF THE ADMISSIONS DIRECTOR

- Sarah Butler reported that our census is at 137. Since our last meeting we have had 19 new admissions but have also had 15 deaths.
- We are in the process of trying to increase the census. We do have 4 admissions scheduled to come in.
- We are also scheduled to attend 2 outreach events to try and build the waiting list. Unlike some of the other homes, our waiting list is not as long yet.

REPORT OF THE COMMANDANT

- Vito Ruggiero introduced himself as the “new old guy”. He was commandant a few years past.
- He reported that we hosted a golf tournament on June 6th, and it was the highest amount ever raised. We will have the amount next meeting.
- Our roofing project is completed, and the courtyard has reopened.
- We will begin the replacement of the heating and air conditioning units on September 6th. We will be starting with 1S. Letters will be sent out to the families to notify them of the project and changes.
- The COVID rate is currently at 17.46 which is high. We are following the policies. All those not up to date are required to test bi-weekly, wear safety glasses and N-95 masks.
- We are continuing to offer vaccine clinics to residents, staff and family.
- We have 131 of 137 residents not fully vaccinated. Today we have 2 more scheduled which will bring us to 133.
- Our admissions have decided to raise our census goal to 75% capacity which will bring in 10 more residents. We are confident that with the allotted overtime we will be able to raise our compliment to 75% and still maintain an open unit incase we need to create a red area again for COVID.
- Our off-site trips have increased for our residents.
- We received our VA survey response regarding the 3 deficiencies that the facility received. We are compliant other than a bond which is being handled by our legal department.
- Yesterday we had DOH here as a follow-up from a complaint to see if we are following up on our submitted plan of correction. They also had a new complaint. Happy to say we are compliant, and that the new complaint is unsubstantiated.
- Our Vets Home Week was a success. Travis and Maria were in the dunk tank for money.
- Saturday is our motorcycle ride with Harley Davidson. Janice can give you more information if you stop at her office.
- On August 2nd, we celebrated Morris Kashuba who turned 103.
- All of our homes will be participating in a cooking contest. Our home’s entry will be tasted and voted on today. You are all welcome to stay for that.
 - Joe Sylvester stated that his organization would like to take the residents to a restaurant like they used to. Vito stated that we are beginning to go out again and that he should contact Pam or Jan.

THE GOOD OF THE COUNCIL

- Robert Cudworth asked why do we have to have 2 witnesses when a patient needs to get a shot. Isn’t it a matter of the custodian or guardian? Barbara stated that we are just making sure that everyone is aware of the treatments and what is going into their body.
- Carol Sweeney for Karen Boback stated that the Veterans’ Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee went to Penn State on August 10th, they attended the informational meeting held at the Veterans’ and Service Member’s legal clinic. They met with Michele Vollmer, a clinical professor of law and associate dean for clinics and experiential learning as well as other individuals to discuss the mission of the clinic. The clinic provides, among other things, assistance with VA related legal issues such as disability, pension, education benefits, advocacy for change in law and legislation that will further benefit veterans and their families.

House Bill 1421 which is Act 54, provides money for the following: an increase in the amount of a stipend from 150.00 to 250.00 for honor guard burial details. It authorizes the PA National Guard to provide burial details when veterans' service organization members are not available or unable to provide the burial detail. An increase in the base pay for members of Pennsylvania National Guard and Pennsylvania Guard ordered to special or active state duty to not less than 180.00 per day.

House Bill 1867 now Act 69, which encourages school districts to identify and assist students of transient military personnel.

House Bill 2412 now Act 38, authorizes the PANG to support state and local governments with cyber training or exercises while activated.

- Russell Canevari asked for clarification of the honor guard stipend. Lisa Kaye stated that military burials and honors are supposed to be free of charge and money is from donations. She stated that she doesn't believe it's accurate that people are getting paid 250.00 per funeral. If a family wants to give a donation that is a whole different issue, but honors are supposed to be free. This has been a battle that people are being charged and that people are being paid and the families aren't being given the option for free. Lisa also stated that this issue is being brought to the attention of the State Veterans' Commission.
- Travis ended with the real problem right now is the red tape around hiring. We are trying to be creative with our hiring and becoming a Commonwealth employee. What's promising is that we are not seeing a huge exit of all our direct care staff leaving for all the crazy offers being posted all over the state. Our turnover numbers are nowhere near what they are in the private sector, they are high regardless which is concerning. We need to keep pushing the boundaries of what we are told that we can and cannot do. We sare looking for support from our state reps and senators as well as the council and the organizations to move the needle. We are hoping with the new budget, we will have the ability to be creative and get people in our doors.

ADJOURNMENT

The next meeting was announced: November 17, 2022, at 10:00 a.m.

Delaware Valley Veterans' Home, Philadelphia PA - Peter Ojeda - Commandant											
Level of Care	Authorized Beds	Available Beds [Auth Beds Less Pending Cert.]	Beds Assigned	Beds Vacant	Pending VA Certification	Percentage Filled	Admissions	Discharges	Expirations	Waiting List Veteran/Placing	Waiting List Non-Veteran/Placing
Nursing Care	141	100	98	2	41	98%	5	0	2	45	14
Memory Care	30	30	30	0	0	100%	0	0	0	23	9
Total	171	130	128	2	41	99%	5	0	2	68	23
Non-Veteran Census Percent						5%					
Gino J. Merli Veterans' Center, Scranton PA - Vito Ruggiero - Commandant											
Level of Care	Authorized Beds	Available Beds Equal Auth. Beds	Beds Assigned	Beds Vacant	Infrastructure Beds on Hold	Percentage Filled	Admissions	Discharges	Expirations	Waiting List Veteran/Placing	Waiting List Non-Veteran/Placing
Nursing Care	156	156	102	54	0	65%	1	1	9	17	18
Memory Care	40	40	27	13	0	68%	0	0	2	3	3
Total	196	196	129	67	0	66%	1	1	11	20	21
Non-Veteran Census Percent						12%					
Holidaysburg Veterans' Home, Holidaysburg PA - Sam Dunkle - Commandant											
Level of Care	Authorized Beds	Available Beds Equal Auth. Beds	Beds Assigned	Beds Vacant	Infrastructure Beds on Hold	Percentage Filled	Admissions	Discharges	Expirations	Waiting List Veteran/Placing	Waiting List Non-Veteran/Placing
Nursing Care	231	231	143	88	0	62%	6	3	2	11	3
Memory Care	26	26	21	5	0	81%	1	0	0	0	0
Personal Care	167	167	74	93	0	44%	0	1	0	1	1
Total	424	424	238	186	0	56%	7	4	2	12	4
Non-Veteran Census Percent						19%					
Pennsylvania Soldiers' & Sailors' Home, Erie PA - Cheri Spacht - Commandant											
Level of Care	Authorized Beds	Available Beds Equal Auth. Beds	Beds Assigned	Beds Vacant	Infrastructure Beds on Hold	Percentage Filled	Admissions	Discharges	Expirations	Waiting List Veteran/Placing	Waiting List Non-Veteran/Placing
Nursing Care	75	75	62	13	0	83%	0	0	1	30	10
Memory Care	32	32	16	16	0	50%	0	0	0	0	4
Personal Care	100	100	57	43	0	57%	0	0	0	3	2
Total	207	207	135	72	0	65%	0	0	1	33	16
Non-Veteran Census Percent						11%					
Southeastern Veterans' Center, Spring City PA - Brian Gula - Commandant											
Level of Care	Authorized Beds	Available Beds Equal Auth. Beds	Beds Assigned	Beds Vacant	Infrastructure Beds on Hold	Percentage Filled	Admissions	Discharges	Expirations	Waiting List Veteran/Placing	Waiting List Non-Veteran/Placing
Nursing Care	208	208	122	86	0	59%	7	2	5	24	6
Memory Care	30	30	29	1	0	97%	0	0	0	32	13
Personal Care	54	54	39	15	0	72%	1	4	0	10	3
Total	292	292	190	102	0	65%	8	6	5	66	22
Non-Veteran Census Percent						8%					
Southwestern Veterans' Center, Pittsburgh PA - Richard Adams - Commandant											
Level of Care	Authorized Beds	Available Beds Equal Auth. Beds	Beds Assigned	Beds Vacant	Infrastructure Beds on Hold	Percentage Filled	Admissions	Discharges	Expirations	Waiting List Veteran/Placing	Waiting List Non-Veteran/Placing
Nursing Care	196	196	101	95	0	52%	0	1	4	13	11
Memory Care	40	40	30	10	0	75%	0	0	0	0	4
Total	236	236	131	105	0	56%	0	1	4	13	15
Non-Veteran Census Percent						15%					
Summary / Pennsylvania Bureau of Veterans' Homes											
Veteran Census/Events	Auth Beds	Available Beds [Auth Beds Less Pending Cert.]	Beds Assigned	Beds Vacant	Pending VA Certification	Percentage Filled	Admissions	Discharges	Expirations	Waiting List Veteran/Placing	Waiting List Non-Veteran/Placing
Nursing Care	1007	966	628	338	41	65%	19	7	23	140	62
Memory Care	198	198	153	45	0	77%	1	0	2	58	33
Personal Care	321	321	170	151	0	53%	1	5	0	14	6
Totals	1,526	1,485	951	534	41	64%	21	12	25	212	101
Veteran Status: Non-Veteran/Veteran	Total Non-Vets (f)	Male Non-Vet	% Non Vets (f)	Total Vets (f)	% Vets (f)	Male Vets	Total Male (f)	Female Non-Vets	Female Vets	Total Female (f)	VH Totals (f)
DVVH	7	0	5%	121	95%	120	120	7	1	8	128
GJMVC	16	3	12%	113	88%	110	113	13	3	16	129
HVH	45	2	19%	193	81%	182	184	43	11	54	238
PSSH	15	2	11%	120	89%	111	113	13	9	22	135
SEVC	15	1	8%	175	92%	164	165	14	11	25	190
SWVC	19	2	15%	112	85%	108	110	17	4	21	131
Totals	117	10	12%	834	88%	795	805	107	39	146	951