

**GINO J. MERLI VETERANS' CENTER  
ADVISORY COUNCIL MEETING  
February 15, 2024**

**CALL TO ORDER**

Meeting was held both in person and via teleconference.  
Lisa Solarczyk, President, called the meeting to order at 10:00 am.

**ROLL CALL**

Secretary Bernie McDonald recorded roll call and attendance was as follows:

**MEMBERS**

*Lisa Solarczyk, President – Marine Corps League*  
*William Smith, Vice President – The American Legion*  
*Bernard “Bernie” McDonald, Secretary – AMVETS*  
*Robert Cudworth – Military Officers Association of America*  
*Robert Smith – Military Order of the Purple Heart (Excused)*  
*Russell Canevari – Veterans of Foreign Wars (Excused)*  
*Richard Wren – Catholic War Veterans’*  
*Joe Sylvester – Disabled American Veterans*  
*McKenzie Mueller for Rosemary Brown – PA State Senate*  
*Kyle Donahue – PA House of Representatives*  
*Tim Cleveland – PSACDVA (Excused)*  
*Lisa Kaye – PSACDVA (via teleconference)*  
*Wilson Miller – GJMVC Resident Representative (Excused)*

**DMVA**

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

**OTHERS PRESENT / INTRODUCTION OF GUESTS**

Daniel Kazmierski, Medical Director  
Michael Mecca, Admissions  
Jan McAllister, GMVC  
Erica Comine, GMVC  
Lynn O’Day, Recorder

**MOMENT OF SILENCE**

- Vito informed the council that an employee of GMVC had passed away the night before and asked the council to also keep her in their prayers as well.

**REVIEW OF MEMBER STATUS**

- The status of council members was reviewed. Bill Smith of the American Legion was sworn in for his reappointment, prior to the meeting.

## **REVIEW OF PREVIOUS MINUTES**

- Previous minutes accepted as written.
  - Joe Sylvester and Bernie McDonald

## **REPORT OF THE DEPUTY ADJUTANT GENERAL**

- General Weigl reported that she has been very busy with the state budget. There are no big issues. The budget has gone down a bit for the homes but nothing that will impact operations.
- We had the quarterly review with the Governor's Advisory Committee for Veterans' Services. We have committees on aging, homelessness, women's issues, mental and behavioral health and different areas. They will be doing a women's magazine. It will be published in June and will be highlighting resources for female veterans across the Commonwealth. They will be doing a story on the homes and highlighting some of the female veterans and spouses as well as employees. All the service organizations have the opportunity to submit stories of the females in their organization. Articles are free and the deadline is March 1<sup>st</sup>.
- Next week, the general will be attending the NASDVA conference. It is the National Association for State Directors of Veterans' Affairs. They will have an opportunity to speak with the federal VA directors. Travis will be reporting on his recent NASVH conference.
- New for this coming year, we will be having our first ever, veterans' conference in Pittsburgh. It will include the federal VA, the state secretaries for various departments such as homelessness, aging, transportation etc., county directors, service organizations, all the commandants and local non and for profits. We will be making sure everyone, and all issues are brought to the table to discuss. The top 5 issues are housing and homelessness, transportation, aging, long-term care, and appointments. This will be a by invitation to attend affair.
  - Bill Smith asked if there is a date and the general stated it will be held September 4<sup>th</sup> through September 7.

## **REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF LONG-TERM CARE**

- Travis Davis is also reporting for Barbara Raymond. We have been busy. In 2023, we had over 41 inspections from survey agencies, across the 6 homes. We also have a compliance team that does a full survey and there were 9 of those also.
- Gino Merli is one of 3 facilities waiting for the VA to survey.
- We have been doing well in terms of infection prevention and respiratory illnesses. As of Monday, we only had 1 resident in the state with COVID.
- We have had some key personnel moves across the homes. 2 new DONs, 1 new commandant and Southwest's commandant will be retiring and there is a posting for that position.
- 4 of our homes remain a 5 star including Gino Merli and 2 are 3 star. We have seen a huge increase in quality metrics across the state.
- Recruitment retention is still our biggest challenge. We have over 350 vacancies.
- Admissions are doing well.
- The governor's budget has nothing that we know of, regarding Medicaid although there is some money earmarked towards long-term care agencies but nothing for providers so far.
- Travis reported that he and Vito were in DC last week for the NASVH conference. They were advocating for the VA to pay for high-cost medications in home. We were

advocacy for the VA to cover all specialty care for veterans in the homes and also the basic per diem rate which is the rate we are reimbursed by the VA to keep up with inflation and escalating costs.

- We have some exciting construction projects that will kick off.

### **REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF VETERANS' HOMES**

- Included with report given by Travis.

### **REPORT OF THE COMMANDANT**

- Vito reported that we have a new clinical services manager. We have 2 new ADONs, a new QA director, a new QA staff and a new admissions coordinator.
- We are awaiting the VA annual survey. It should take place next Monday or Tuesday. We are confident that we are ready.
- We are a 5-star building and we take that to heart. With all the leadership changes we have been able to maintain the rating.
- It is our 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Our first admission was January 19<sup>th</sup> 30 years ago. We are working on our Main St Project. We are giving a facelift to the first floor. We are moving the chapel and the canteen will be moving to a larger space with a gathering area. We are going to honor all the military on our walls, and it will be modernized.
- Our parking lot was paved, and we have a new digital sign on the corner. This will help promote activities and jobs.
- Johnson College will be building our tiki bar for their school project in the courtyard.
- Our phone system is 30 years old. Kathleen has been working to get quotes to update our phone system.

### **REPORT OF THE MEDICAL DIRECTOR**

- Dr. Kazmierski reported COVID has lessened in its bite but is still around. In the last 3 months we have had 4 positive residents and 41 positive staff.
- The RSV vaccine is available and 50-60% of the residents have received it.
- We continue to offer vaccines to both staff and residents. We had 1 refusal for the FLU vaccine, 165 residents receiving and 76 staff. 135 residents and 6 staff have received the updated COVID vaccine.
- Little by little we are adapting to COVID. The CDC may change recommendations.
- Screening for chronic diseases guidelines, mostly recommend until the age of 75. We have been reviewing charts and are going to make recommendations. Some examples are osteoporosis screening for women over 65, colon cancer and colonoscopies every 10 years as well as mammograms, pap smears, PSA, scanning for aneurysms and lung cancer screening for those who smoked up to 15 years prior. We are doing our best to screen.
- We continue to try and reduce antibiotics and psychotropic drug use.

### **REPORT OF THE ADMISSIONS DIRECTOR**

- Michael reported that the current census is 164. We have had 12 admissions and 10 discharges since our last meeting as well as an admission today, tomorrow and 2 next week.
- Currently processing applications. Our waitlist is 4-6 weeks for veterans, 9 months for memory care and 3-6 months for spouses.
- We are going to start getting out in the community more in the spring.

## **THE GOOD OF THE COUNCIL**

- Erica introduced herself as the new Clinical Services Manager. She stated that she oversees nursing, activities, and pharmacy services. We employ 334 employees. We can compete with all the local agencies. When we hire, we are almost always hiring at a higher rate than some of the other facilities. We are always looking for new employees and ask that you spread the word. If you know of anyone looking for employment, send them to walk-in Wednesdays in the lobby from 10am to 3.  
We have 17 veteran staff members. In January the representative from the DMVA to offer additional services to our veteran staff and their spouses. We are always looking for additional benefits that we can provide for them.  
We continue to provide activities to the residents including hockey games, baseball games, Walmart, VFWs, and dine-ins. People contribute to our resident welfare fund, and we are always getting recommendations and requests for places to go and things to do. We are continuing our preventative immunizations to both residents and staff.  
We partner with local organizations for many things.
  - Vito stated that we are building relationships with the community. We have created a partnership with the FOP. We received the numbers for our last golf tournament, and it was \$25,000.00. The FOP has donated and raised almost \$60,000.00 for our resident welfare fund in the last 2 years. On top of that, they wanted to honor our staff with a hot buffet lunch on all 3 shifts.
- Jan McAllister announced that the resident welfare fund balance is 107,540.73. The FOP will be hosting our 3<sup>rd</sup> annual golf tournament on Monday, June 3<sup>rd</sup>. Harley Davidson will be holding the annual memorial ride on Saturday, August 17.
- Kathleen Ambrose reported that we have been evaluating the residents for catastrophic disability through VES (veterans evaluation services). We have had some roadblocks, but General Weigl has been instrumental in getting the blocks knocked down. Walk-in Wednesdays have continued and one of the biggest turnouts we have is for nurse aide training. We pay you to go to school. We pay for the cost of the education and certification and once complete, you are hired as a CNA. It is a good wage while learning. Kathleen also presented a copy of the Command Post which is the very first newsletter issued 30 years ago.
- Lisa Kaye reported that the association of county directors conference will be in Scranton June 17 through 21. We did a tour last year and would like to do it again this year. They will be at the Radisson and would also like some residents to attend and will contact GMVC to discuss that later.
- Bill Smith reported that on February 25 will be having the American Legion winter conference in Washington DC. Monday, February 26, there will be a presentation recognizing VA medical staff. There are roughly 170 VA facilities across the nation. This year, the recipient is from Philadelphia. The down side, only 1 submission was made out of all the facilities. The National Commander of the American Legion will be touring Pennsylvania starting March 18. They will come into the eastern section of the state on the 19<sup>th</sup>. On April 3, they will be holding department executive committee meeting in Scranton. The State Commander is Steve Lavelle who comes from Dunmore. June 12 -16 the Hallstead Auxiliary will be hosting the traveling wall at American Legion 357.

## **ADJOURNMENT**

*The next meeting was announced: May 16, 2024, at 10:00 a.m.*