

**GINO J. MERLI VETERANS' CENTER  
ADVISORY COUNCIL MEETING  
May 16, 2024**

**CALL TO ORDER**

Meeting was held both in person and vis teleconference.  
Travis Davis, executive director 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 (excused)*  
*William Smith, Vice President - The American Legion (via telephone)*  
*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*  
*Rosemary Brown - PA State Senate (via telephone)*  
*Kyle Donahue - PA House of Representatives*  
*Tim Cleveland – PSACDVA (via telephone)*  
*Lisa Kaye – PSACDVA (via telephone)*  
*Wilson Miller - GJMVC Resident Representative (excused)*

**DMVA**

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

**OTHERS PRESENT / INTRODUCTION OF GUESTS**

Daniel Kazmierski, Medical Director  
Michael Mecca, Admissions  
Lynn O'Day, Recorder  
Erica Comine, Clinical Services Manager  
Joseph Chiochio, QA  
Sarah Ruggiero, QA  
Janice McAllister, Volunteers  
Sean O'Shea, Kyle Donahue's office

**MOMENT OF SILENCE**

## **REVIEW OF MEMBER STATUS**

- Member status was reviewed.
  - There is a vacancy for the Blinded Veterans.
  - Lisa Kaye and Russell Canevari expire 4/5/2024. Requests for reappointment have been submitted.

## **REVIEW OF PREVIOUS MINUTES**

- Previous minutes accepted as written.

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

- General Weigl reported that there have been some leadership changes at the Gap. General Raegan retired and will be replaced by General Koudelka who will, in turn, be replaced by Brigadier General Pippy.
- May 18<sup>th</sup> is the Armed Forces Day Parade.
- Next week is the senior leadership conference at the Southeast Veterans' Center.
- Memorial Day weekend activities at all the homes.
- May 30<sup>th</sup> is our big fishing derby.
- June 12<sup>th</sup> is Women Veterans Day.
- June 13<sup>th</sup>, the governor will be honoring 20 different female veterans from across the Commonwealth, and we will be publishing our first ever Women Veterans magazine.
- September 4<sup>th</sup> through the 6<sup>th</sup>, we will be having our first ever veterans' conference. It will include federal, state, and local government leaders as well as private, public partnerships. We will be coming together to look at issues and initiatives for vets and how we can all work together. American Legions, VFWs and other service organizations will be invited from the state level.

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

- Travis Davis reported for both him and Barbara Raymond, director of homes. Since our last meeting we have had the VA and Department of Health in multiple facilities for their annual surveys. So far this year we have had Southeast, Gino Merli, Erie, and Southwest that have all completed their VA annual surveys which all went very well. We have had our DOH annual surveys at Southwest and Erie.
- Across all the homes we have no active COVID/RSV/FLU in either staff or residents. We have seen the Norovirus pop up in a few homes, but we have been able to treat those and manage them in-house.
- We have a lot of personnel moves across the homes. We had a new physician at Southeast. We have a new commandant starting in Pittsburgh. Our former commandant, Rich Adams did retire. We are recruiting for a physician at Delaware Valley. We have a new grievance coordinator for our department who helps assist all social workers. Our former grievance coordinator, Margo Coleman is now the new commandant at Delaware Valley. We have made an offer to a full-time physician at Hollidaysburg, they will be starting in June.
- This year, we have launched our first official internship program through the Bureau of Veterans' Homes. We place graduate students from across the state into one of our veterans' homes and allow them to work under a licensed nursing home administrator. They do about 800 to 1000 hours. They shadow every department working on various projects and once they are completed with us, they can sit and take their boards to receive their Nursing Home Administrator's license.

- Currently we have 2 5-star homes which are Delaware Valley and Gino Merli. Gino Merli is the only 5-star home in Lackawanna County. We have 2 4-star facilities which are Southwest and Southeast. We have 2 3-star which are Hollidaysburg and Erie.
- Our biggest challenge is recruitment and retention. The VA is putting out a grant, specifically for nursing recruitment. It will be a 3-year grant where you can get up to 1% of your per-diem rate. It will mean just over a million dollars for the 6 homes. We are going to apply for this and put a proposal together for the Office of Administration as well as the unions. We are going to try and get creative. These are federal dollars, and they are specifically for veterans' homes across the country.
- We have about 300 vacancies across the homes. Gino Merli has been building up the census. Across the homes, we are about 73% filled.
- We brief the Adjutant General quarterly. From our last compliance and quality assurance meeting, we talked about how the homes are doing with their performance improvement projects and quality metrics. We also presented him our resident and family satisfaction surveys. Which are questionnaires that go out to our residents and their families to tell us how we are doing. If there are any categories that we score below 80% or that we drop 10%, we immediately put a performance improvement project into place and re-evaluate. Gino Merli was the only home this year that did not flag in any category for any improvement.
- Another thing we brought to the TAG's awareness is what we are seeing across the state from the Department of Health in the terms of surveys, deficiencies and overall, 5-star ratings. The data was gathered by Pennsylvania Healthcare Association, a third party, and what we have seen 5-star overall ratings are decreasing across the board. The total number of deficiencies from annual surveys increasing as well as G-level deficiencies, where there is actual harm or abuse, and we are seeing the number of complaint visits increase.
- We have Veterans' Homes Week coming up from June 10 through June 16. The schedules are available if anyone cares to join us.
- We will be sending a bus load of residents to the TAG fishing derby. Last year it was cancelled due to the air quality from the Canadian wildfires.
- The federal government through the centers of Medicare and Medicaid services, put out a rule to increase staffing minimums in nursing homes across the country. The Department of Health in Pennsylvania did this last year, and we are already in year 2 of their staffing increase. The final federal rule would make our ppd increase to a 3.48. Currently, only 1 in 5 nursing homes in Pennsylvania can meet those numbers today. They are anticipating the need for an additions 16,000 healthcare workers (RNs, LPNs, and CNAs) to get to those numbers. Nationwide, we are looking at over 100,000. Nationally there will be about a 7billion annual cost increase for providers to meet these staffing levels. In Pennsylvania, it is just over 500 million. One of the troubling issues is that there is no reimbursement ties to this proposal. Another is, we are in the middle of a staffing shortage, and we need physical people to fill these jobs.
- Hollidaysburg is our largest campus and our largest workforce. We are building a new community living center. Travis showed pictures and renditions of what it will look like. It is over 50% complete.
- We are doing some major renovations here. We removed the trees and added a fence. We added a new roof. We are going to be doing some major enhancements to our 1<sup>st</sup> floor area to create more space for the residents to gather and congregate with families and

other residents. We have plans to upgrade employee breakrooms, the nurse call system and some more work on the exterior of the building.

- The advisory councils always ask what they can do for the facilities. Spread awareness. Please go into the community and spread awareness of the veterans' homes and the spousal benefits.
- Travis explained a comparison between community nursing homes and veterans' homes. In the community the primary population is female where in the veterans' home is primarily male. Also, from a payor source, about 75-85% of nursing home residents are paid for through Medicaid. In a community nursing home, the resident on Medicaid are allowed to a personal needs allowance of \$45.00 per month, here we have an enhanced veteran reimbursement rate, and those Medicaid recipients (male, female, spouse or veteran) are allowed to keep \$450.00 per month. That is a big difference on top of staffing ratios and quality measures. Alost of people think these homes are just for men. So, if we could pass that along to our fellow veterans in the community that would greatly help.
  - Richard Wren asked about the competition. Does the facility have any form of nursing internship with the colleges?
    - Formally we don't have any partnerships, but we do work with several different schools with nurse trainee programs, but we are working with state schools and community schools to engage their interests on partnerships, but a lot of other providers are doing that as well.
  - Richard asked about our hiring process and incentives. He stated that we do not pay more for experience, we pay a flat rate across the board.
    - Travis stated that we have pay scales that are set. Erica stated that we do reimburse for certifications, CNA training and education. Vito stated that people need to look at the bigger picture. We offer the benefits with retirement plans and healthcare, unfortunately, today's mindset is not about the future, it is more about right now.
  - Kyle Donahue asked for clarification on the state ratio. The current ratio is 2.9 and it is going to 3.2 in July. If the federal rule goes in, it will be 3.4 what will that impact. Also, regarding reimbursements, there is an idea floating for quality-based reimbursements.
    - Erica stated that we are well above the ratio. We are averaging 3.3 to 4.0 monthly.
    - Vito discussed what the number (ratio) represents. This is hands on direct care per patient, per day. It's not a fabricated ratio, it's hands on direct care to our residents.

### **REPORT OF THE COMMANDANT**

- Vito reported he is proud that we are the only 5-star in Lackawanna County.
- We hired a new clinical services manager, 2 assistant directors of nursing, admissions and quality assurance.
- The VA survey was conducted with one minor infraction in the kitchen. The wheels under the Ansell system were not lined up correctly centered. We fixed that.
- We are planning our 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. 30 years ago, January, was the first resident here at Gino Merli. Prior to that it was Northeast Veterans' Center. We are going to be celebrating the 27<sup>th</sup> of June.

- Our tiki bar is completed. Our maintenance department has begun to stain it. We had a donation from one of our residents to purchase all the supplies and Johnson College students built it. Our residents are really going to enjoy that.
- June 3<sup>rd</sup> is our annual golf tournament. This is the 3<sup>rd</sup> year. Last year raised over \$60,000 for our resident welfare fund. It will be held at the Mount Airy Casino.
- Veterans home week is June 10 through the 16<sup>th</sup>. We have a week of fun scheduled for all our residents and staff.
- Flag Day is June 14. We have a program scheduled which includes our carnival where you can throw a pie in my face.

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

- Dr. Kazmierski reported on our COVID and infection numbers. We had 11 residents positive in February and March. We have had 0 FLU and 0 RSV. There was a brief outbreak of a GI virus but was contained with no hospitalizations or issues.
- We continue to try and vaccinate as many residents and staff as we can against COVID, Influenza and RSV.
- We continue to try and screen some of the eligible residents for certain diseases. Most screening guidelines only apply to the patients under the age of 75 but we strive to get them screening such as mammograms and colonoscopies. Dexascans, which test bone density are applicable beyond age 75, especially for women.
- We continue to try and decrease our antibiotic usage. We have been doing very well. Our antibiotic usage has gone way down. We are trying to be very judicious on how we use antibiotics especially with urinary tract infections.
- We continue to try and reduce our usage of antipsychotic medications. Government guidelines suggest we keep that no more than 15-20% of the total residents. We have weekly meetings regarding psychotropic usage and we try and decrease that use.

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

- Michael reported that our census is 170.
- We have had 26 admissions and 20 discharges since our last meeting.
- Our current waitlist is 6 to 8 weeks for skilled nursing, 9 months for spouse and memory care is 9 months.
- Attended several outreach programs. Went to Camp Freedom and set up a table. It was a great place. Went to an American Legion with Erica which was very fruitful. Many did not know about the spousal benefits.

### **REPORT OF THE DEPUTY COMMANDANT**

- Kathleen reported that Gino Merli has a 5-year plan. The plan is for large capital purchases. She proudly stated that when we need things, we get them. Some of the items we have purchased within the last year was a fence around the building, we are awaiting the start of construction for a new canteen and chapel, we are getting new sidewalks in the front, all new dining room tables for the resident dining rooms, we had new flooring installed in the multipurpose room and administration wing, we got new equipment and educational items. We really do get the support that we need so that the residents and staff have the things that they need.
- We have applied for a veterans' grant with the city of Scranton. We proposed to use the money for custom plaques that would be used for every resident room and the resident and family would be able to keep the plaque on discharge. Corrections has brought

samples through Fort Indiantown Gap, and they are very lovely. We will still move forward with our plans even if we do not receive the grant.

- The family of Jim Meigoc, who was a CNA here at the Merli center, is again, sponsoring a CNA award for \$2500. The residents will vote, and they pick the CNA. This is not endorsed by GMVC or DMVA but by the family in memory of Jim.

### **REPORT OF THE VOLUNTEER COORDINATOR**

- Janice reported that the balance of the resident welfare fund is \$189,805.35.
- Reminded everyone that the annual golf tournament is going to be held at the beginning of June.

### **REPORT OF QUALITY ASSURANCE**

- Joe stated that we strive to make continuous improvements and ensure better care for our residents. We identify areas where there is an opportunity to improve making sure we can pass the surveys and put performance plans in place when there are issues identified.

### **REPORT OF CLINICAL SERVICES**

- Erica reminded everyone that this Saturday is the Armed Forces Parade. It is starting at Gino Merli and we are hoping that the weather cooperates. We are going to attempt to get all the residents to the curb so they can participate in the parade.
- We have several residents attending the Armed Forces Luncheon today at the Hilton.
- Our residents have been getting out and about into the community. They have been to see the Rail Riders and to see Oppenheimer at the Art House downtown.
- Facility Performance Assessment is an internal assessment that is conducted by the DMVA. They come in and evaluate a lot of our processes and give us recommendations on what they would like us to change. We are in the process of doing audits and completing that. One thing came up on the life safety side of the VA survey, but we received no deficiencies in the nursing and clinical services area. We are always working to be prepared for upcoming surveys and we are always working on ways to conduct our regular daily clinical activities in a way that enhance the quality for the residents.
- We have partnered with Revolutionary to assist us in educating our CNAs and certifying our CNAs. They will be conducting clinicals here. Penn State University will also be conducting clinicals here in August with their RNs.
- Speaking of our 5-star rating, the fact that we have great staffing ratios and equipment and the way we treat our residents, does help with onboarding.
- We currently have 340 employees including our contractors. We continue to be a large employer in the area, and we are always conducting interviews. We have a great turnout on walk-in Wednesdays. We hope that if you know people in the community that are interested in working at the center, that you suggest and send them to us. Every Wednesday we are here in the lobby and interviewing.

### **THE GOOD OF THE COUNCIL**

- Travis thanked everyone for their time and support. He reminded them that there are some great events coming up and we look forward to seeing them come to celebrate and participate.

### **ADJOURNMENT**

*The next meeting was announced: August 15, 2024, at 10:00 a.m.*