



## **SOUTHEASTERN VETERANS' CENTER ADVISORY COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES**

**July 11, 2024**

The Southeastern Veterans' Center Advisory Council met July 11, 2024 at 10:00 AM in the All-Purpose Room of Coates Hall at the Southeastern Veterans' Center.

### **Advisory Council Members Participating:**

Barry Amole, Vietnam Veterans of America, President  
Kenneth Schweitzer, American Legion, Secretary  
Doug Forsythe, Disabled American Veterans  
Richard Doherty, Military Officers Association of America  
Thomas Applebach, Lehigh County Office of Veterans' Affairs  
Kenneth Nadwodny, Catholic War Veterans  
Thomas Brown, Veterans of Foreign Wars  
John Getz, Veterans of Foreign Wars  
Robert Richardson, Resident Representative

### **Department of Military and Veterans' Affairs/Southeastern Veterans' Center:**

Maureen Weigl, Deputy Adjutant General of Veterans' Affairs – DMVA  
Travis Davis, Executive Director, Long-Term Care – DMVA  
Barbara Raymond, BVH Director – DMVA  
Patricia Derry, Deputy for Administration- DMVA  
Michael Belcher, Veterans' Services Specialist- DMVA  
Brian Gula, Commandant – SEVC  
Mildred Butler-Coleman, Deputy Commandant- SEVC  
Dr. Sin Kei Yeung, Medical Director- SEVC  
Jill Alwine, Admissions and Marketing Coordinator – SEVC  
Sarah Klufas, Assistant to the Commandant - SEVC

### **Visitors:**

Linda Neiman, Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary  
Dan Kuper, Personal Care Resident  
Nikki Whitlock, Chief of Staff, Senator Katie Muth's Office  
Christine Olmstead, Geriatrics and Extended Care Services, CVAMC- **via Microsoft TEAMS**  
Anna Brown- wife of Thomas Brown

### **Excused Absence:**

Mary Archey, Marine Corps League, Vice President  
Jeffrey Elliot, PA AMVETS  
Thomas Coreau, Dauphin County Office of Veterans' Affairs  
The Honorable Dan Williams, PA House of Representatives  
The Honorable Tracy Pennycuik, PA State Senate  
MG Mark J. Schindler, Adjutant General - DMVA  
Mia Woods, Compliance and Ethics Officer- DMVA

**Call to Order:**

The Advisory Council Meeting was called to order by Barry Amole at 10:00 AM. There was a moment of silence, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance.

**Swearing in of Council Members:**

Doug Forsythe, Disabled American Veterans, and Thomas Brown, Veterans of Foreign Wars, were sworn in by General Maureen Weigl.

**Review and Approval of April 11, 2024, Meeting Minutes:**

A motion was made by Ken Schweitzer and seconded by Thomas Applebach to approve the minutes of the Advisory Council Meeting held on April 11, 2024. Motion carried, and minutes were approved as written.

**Report of the Medical Director - Dr. Sin Kei Yeung - SEVC:**

Dr. Sin Kei Yeung, Medical Director, stated that she has met with every resident in the building, some twice or more. Our new CRNP, Erin, started at the end of June. She started seeing residents on the floor at the beginning of July. She has been doing well and there have been no issues so far.

**Report of the Admissions and Marketing Coordinator - Jill Alwine - SEVC:**

Jill Alwine, Admissions Coordinator, provided the council with an admissions update. Jill reported that our census as of June 30<sup>th</sup> was 216, leaving us with 76 vacancies, mostly due to staffing or quarantine space. We have only had 8 admissions over the last quarter, due to us being basically at capacity. Year-to-date we have had 31 admissions. Our waitlist is at 109 total applicants, 84 veterans and 25 non-veterans. The approximate waitlist times are 2-3 months for personal care, 4-6 months for our skilled nursing units, and our memory care unit is currently about a 2-year wait, due to it being our smallest unit.

**Report of the Deputy Adjutant General – General Maureen Weigl – DMVA:**

General Weigl started by saying that the budget has not yet passed so, while there is no impact on our Veterans Homes, there is a little impact on everyone else as there are some current limitations, like no travel.

There have been a few leadership changes at Fort Indiantown GAP. The Deputy Adjutant General to the PA Air National Guard Major General Regan recently retired. Major General Terry Koudelka, previously our Joint Staff General, has replaced him and Brigadier General John Pippy is now our Joint Staff Commander.

We have started a new initiative to look at our culture across DMVA to make sure that employees feel open and willing to come forward with issues. We hired a contractor to host Townhall meetings throughout our homes and at Fort Indiantown GAP to allow employees to give feedback on what is working, what isn't working, how communication is going, to let their voices be heard. It has been going really well and we have received a lot of positive feedback as well as constructive criticism that we can use to change some policies and procedures and standardize things across DMVA. There are some additional people here from the Office of Administration, including Patricia Derry and her team.

September 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> will be the Pennsylvania National Guard Association and PA VetCon conference out in Pittsburgh. Some of the attendees include: the Federal VA, state secretaries, county commissioners and directors, service organizations, the State Veterans Commission, the War Council, and other various non-

profit and public partners. We are getting everyone together to talk about veteran initiatives and talk about the gaps in policies and legislation at the different levels. The head doctor for the Veterans Health Administration is going to talk with us, as well as the head of the Veterans' Benefits Association office. It will be a nice conference with a lot of heavy hitters under one roof, so we are really looking forward to it.

Tom Applebach asked General Weigl if she wanted to speak about Act 27. General Weigl deferred to Tom Applebach, and he explained to the council about Act 27. June 18<sup>th</sup> the Governor signed Act 27, which for our veterans' who are 100% permanently disabled and meet a few other criteria, can be eligible to not pay property taxes, school taxes, local and county taxes. Act 27 removes the equation of their income VA compensation payments and also includes DIC payments to surviving spouses. General Weigl stated that they will be sending out information for the State Veterans Commission to send out to the organizations.

General Weigl also added that the President did make a pardon this past month pardoning same sex partners that in the past, had dishonorable discharges from the military. Folks that had other than honorable discharges, their services can be upgraded to now receive benefits.

**Report of the Executive Director, Long Term Care – Travis Davis – DMVA:**

Travis Davis started by saying that Veterans Homes Week last month was a very big success and he thanked everyone whose organizations helped volunteer and support those events. Governor Shapiro stopped by Southeastern Veterans Center on the last day of Veterans Home week, and he spent a lot of time with our staff and our residents.

We are waiting to see what will happen with the state budget for the long-term care industry and what type of funding we will receive. July 1<sup>st</sup> was the start of year 2 of the Department of Health's staffing increase. Last year's budget, there was funding for year 1's increase, but there was nothing for year 2. So, the long-term care providers are anxiously awaiting to see what will come out of Harrisburg. All 6 of our facilities are in compliance with year 2's requirements for the Department of Health. We do not have an update on the Federal staffing mandate as there has not been any significant movement since our last meeting.

So far, surveys have been going well this year. Five out of the six homes have completed their annual Federal VA surveys. Delaware Valley will have theirs at the end of the year. For the Department of Health, we have completed half of the annual surveys. Southeastern had their annual Department of Health survey during Veterans' Homes week and Governor Shapiro's visit. Brian and the team did an excellent job. Gino Merli, Hollidaysburg, and Delaware Valley are the three facilities that have not had their annual Department of Health surveys yet this year.

Regarding 5-star ratings, Delaware Valley and Gino Merli are ranked as 5-star facilities. Southeastern, Southwestern, and Erie are currently ranked as 4-star facilities and Hollidaysburg is currently at 3-stars.

Director Barb Raymond will provide some infection control numbers across the homes, but those have all been pretty stable and low.

As Dr. Yeung mentioned, we had a new full-time CRNP, Erin, start in June. We will also have another full-time CRNP starting in September.

We are actively recruiting for a Physician at Delaware Valley. We are having some struggles. If anyone knows someone looking for a part time role, there is a great opportunity open at Delaware Valley.

Earlier, Jill went over the census numbers for Southeastern. Over the six homes, we are seeing the waitlist numbers come down as we are filling more beds. Our occupancy rates are around 75%.

Nothing has really changed regarding recruitment and retention. This still remains our biggest challenge. We are working with the Office of Administration to get creative and look at what we can do outside of what we are currently doing. There is a VA grant that we are applying for that, if awarded this grant, we will put some of this money towards recruitment and retention of nursing staff.

Thomas Applebach asked if retention is currently a significant issue. Travis Davis said that we have a harder time with the recruitment. We do well compared to the nursing home industry with retention, but the main struggle is getting new people in the door.

Ken Nadwodny asked what the main reason is that we have trouble with recruitment. Travis Davis said that there are a few different challenges that the Healthcare industry in general is facing. Specifically, the long-term care industry, we are seeing the talent pool of RNs, LPNs, CNAs shrinking and there is more competition with providers trying to recruit them. We are doing ok with our wages and our benefits are really good compared to others, but where we miss out is that a lot of the private industry is able to offer additional incentives such as sign on bonuses, gift cards for picking up additional shifts, etc. Those things add up over the course of time and when they can offer childcare and other additional benefits that we cannot, that is where things get challenging for us.

Thomas Brown joked that Travis just stated what the solution was.

Barry Amole asked if the Adult Day Health Center was being used for anything currently and that there was talk about a year ago of possibly using that space for childcare for staff. Travis Davis mentioned that currently that space is being used for meetings and trainings. Furthermore, Travis stated that we did reach out to some sister agencies throughout the state, but unfortunately, we could not get enough support from Harrisburg to be able to move forward with potential converting the space for childcare use. We still think it would be a great benefit to our staff, but we could not get enough steam behind it.

#### **Report of the Director of Veterans' Homes – Barbara Raymond – DMVA:**

Barbara Raymond stated that currently we are really pushing for standardization across the homes for things such as policy and procedures to staffing levels, so everything is as consistent as possible. Part of the way that we are doing this is by having our Headquarters team go to the homes and perform 'pre-inspections' prior to the licensing agencies annual inspections. By doing these pre-inspections, we are picking up on things that we need to clean up from that best practice and standardization perspective to ideally keep us from getting those 'low hanging fruit' deficient practices. This is an ongoing project across all 6 homes.

From a respiratory illness perspective, only Southeastern has any Covid positive residents. Brian will get more into that. The other 5 homes have no Covid positive staff or residents. Flu season was pretty mild this year, we only had a few cases throughout the year. We currently do not have any cases of Flu or RSV in any of the homes. Regarding vaccines, we have about 45 percent of our residents that received the Spring dose of the Covid vaccine and RSV vaccine acceptance with our residents is about 70 percent. Still no word from the CDC if RSV is going to be recommended on an annual basis. We are anticipating that it

will be, but no definitive response from them yet. There are several pharmaceutical companies working on a combination Flu and Covid vaccination, but no word yet if it will be available for the upcoming Fall season.

As General Weigl mentioned, we have been hosting Townhalls across our homes. It has been a great chance for our staff to voice their concerns. Overall, a lot of what we are hearing is consistent across the homes, so it has been good feedback for us to determine what we need to address. Work- life balance was something that came up quite a bit.

Construction update: the new building at Hollidaysburg is coming along beautifully and is still on track to be completed next year.

From an admissions perspective, we are admitting more people, but as our veterans and residents continue to age, we also lose residents as well, which is why there has not been significant movement from an occupancy percentage standpoint.

**Compliance Report – Mia Woods – DMVA:**

There was not anyone from the Compliance team at the meeting. Barb Raymond stated that the main thing that they are working on are the pre-inspections mentioned earlier in the meeting.

**Report of the Commandant – Brian Gula– SEVC:**

Brian Gula informed the council that we have completed our Department of Health annual survey, federal VA annual survey, and Lifesafety survey for 2024. We are still anticipating our annual Department of Human Services survey for our Personal Care unit. Brian stated that Mildred will go into detail on the Lifesafety findings, but he typically views a successful Lifesafety survey as there are no potential major injuries to our staff and no high dollar amount fixes.

We did have a very successful Department of Health annual survey. We only received one deficiency because we did not follow one of our policies and missed an observation when a resident returned from the hospital with a newly inserted foley catheter. No major issues, just a matter of providing education to the staff to make sure that the observation is complete upon a resident's return. The team did a phenomenal job throughout the survey.

Covid update: this week we had 3 residents that were positive for Covid. Two of which have returned to their home units, so we only currently have one resident on our quarantine unit. We are seeing the benefits of the vaccine. When a resident does test positive, it is not spreading as quickly, and they are experiencing only minor symptoms or are asymptomatic. We are still following Covid protocols in handling and treating as we have done in the past. We still have our quarantine unit with dedicated staff, conducting contact tracing when someone tests positive, and are frequently testing exposed residents.

We had a very successful Veterans' Home week. We had fun events for the residents every day and we are very fortunate that we have the funds, the staff, and the support of outside organizations and volunteers to put on these events for the residents.

Next Wednesday, will be a reboot of our quarterly Family and Friend's meeting. We invited the family and responsible parties of the residents to this meeting, and Brian is going to give a short presentation to attendees on various topics like our annual surveys and how we are regulated on them; talk about our star rating, how we compare within the industry, and how we are moving forward and opportunities for

improvement; review our grievance process should they have any concerns; and allow families to ask any questions they have at the end and give feedback.

We do have a new Director of Nursing that will be starting on August 5<sup>th</sup>, Kimberly Lambert. Both Brian and Barb conducted 1<sup>st</sup> round interviews of the candidates. There was a 2<sup>nd</sup> round of interviews which included 2 other facility staff members, so we could get their opinions as well. We are really excited to have Kimberly on board and look forward to introducing her at the next meeting.

In efforts to increase our census and decrease our waiting list, Jill had a small preliminary meeting to plan the reopening our 3 East unit. This unit has been closed for Covid. We are going to reopen it in a similar fashion to when we reopened 3 West, starting out with about 8-10 residents on the unit. We are looking at making this happen around the Fall, to make sure we have adequate staffing and time to get the rooms ready.

In correlation with the new culture change initiative, we are currently recruiting a Human Resource Analyst 3. The primary function of this position is to be a staff advocate. We want someone who will be out on the floors daily interacting with the staff to help promote recruitment, retention, determine what is working, what's not working, and bring that to the management team. Also, when we do receive a resignation, we want that person to meet with that individual one-on-one to see if there are any common themes across the board to see where we can improve. Headquarters is also rolling out a whole new orientation program on August 5<sup>th</sup>, which will be a standardized across the homes.

Brian provided some numbers to the council of new hires and departures over the past quarter. The total of new hires for April was 12, and we had 5 staff leave, this includes resignations, termination, agency movement etc. In May we had a total of 10 new hires and a total of 9 employees leave the facility. In June, we had 8 new hires and 7 people leave. This includes all departments, not just direct care. This is why we are creating this new HR role; to help us determine why these people leave and how we can improve, to increase employee retention.

John Getz asked what the reason is that these people resign and if it was due to money. Brian responded that it was most likely due to money because the nursing industry is very competitive with wages at the moment. However, we do not currently know exactly why they are leaving, but that is one thing we are going to be utilizing this new HR role for, to determine the 'why'. A majority of our staff give a 2 weeks' notice, so that is an opportunity for a sit down one-to-one with these staff members to determine why they are leaving and what kind of feedback they have for us. John Getz stated that those numbers are a pretty heavy lose every month. Brian agreed and stated that unfortunately, that is the pattern. However, it is not just a Southeastern issue, it is an industry issue. To follow up, Barb Raymond commented that the turnover rate of CNAs in the private sector is about 80 percent, whereas our turnover rate for CNAs is about 40-45 percent, significantly different.

Tom Applebach asked when we lose someone to another Commonwealth agency, is it because of money or because they are going to the next level. Barb stated that if they are going to a sister agency, it would not be money unless it is a promotion. There are some cases where people go to other agencies because they can telework part or full time. Sometimes it is a distance issue, and they find something closer to their home. Tom Applebach followed up with another question asking if we have an average of how long the people who leave have been here. Brian stated that we do not have that data currently. He continued to say that since Covid, long-term care nursing has struggled. We are having an issue with RNs and LPNs that come from other industries, entering the long-term care industry, seeing what type of work is

required and determining that it is not a right fit for them and leaving. Tom Applebach stated that he asked because the people who are here for 3-5 years plus and are leaving for the next level are good advocates for us to help recruit versus someone who is leaving after a short time who is not happy with the industry. Brian followed up that if we are going to be getting nursing staff with non-long-term care backgrounds, that he would like the new HR Analyst to look into what we can do to give these new recruits a good picture of the long-term care industry or help make it a smoother transition for them, so they want to stay.

**Report of the Deputy Commandant- Mildred Butler-Coleman- SEVC:**

Mildred Butler-Coleman stated that our annual Lifesafety survey was conducted on June 10<sup>th</sup>. We had 9 deficiencies; most were very minor things where repairs were made immediately. We did receive one deficiency due to a schedule mixed up with a contractor who missed one of our inspections. Our Institutional Fire and Safety Specialist is going to be keeping an eye on the schedule to make sure it is not a future issue.

Wi-Fi update: our IT contractor came in and installed network boxes, so that we have better connectivity. We have 5G now, so we are current with the times. Residents are slowly getting passwords to be able to use it as well. We will not be able to have everyone using Netflix and streaming services, but they will be able to use the Wi-Fi in their rooms and their families will be able to utilize it as well.

Fitch Electronics will be here over the next two weeks upgrading our overhead paging system in both buildings. Currently, if you wish to page someone, you must page both buildings separately. Also, there are a few areas of the building where you cannot hear the paging system very well. So, over the next few weeks, they are going to be integrating the two paging systems, so you can page both buildings at the same time, along with, adding more speakers so you are able to hear in the dead zones.

We are working on an elopement prevention project. Residents that are elopement risks wear bracelets to help prevent them from wandering in places that they should not or being able to walk out the front doors. These bracelets set off the Wanderguard system to alert staff that a resident is trying to access a restricted area. The elevators in Coates Hall are not currently hooked up to this system, so residents that are an elopement risk can get on the elevator and wander to other floors in the building. This upgrade would prevent the elevator from going between floors when an unaccompanied resident with a Wanderguard bracelet steps on the elevator. Ken Schweitzer asked if the elevator lock-out system would be dangerous in case of a fire. Mildred responded that you cannot use the elevator in the event of a fire anyway, so it would not be an issue. Barb Raymond also replied that the Wanderguard system and other similar systems disengage when the fire alarm goes off, so the doors automatically unlock. Mildred followed up that staff can override the Wanderguard elevator system with their badge if they are accompanying a resident with a Wanderguard bracelet. The upgrade is just to protect unaccompanied residents that may try and get on the elevator.

We would like to thank you and your organizations for everything that you do to improve the quality of life for our residents and for making sure that they have fun activities to do every day. We had 45 volunteers here during Veterans' Home week, some of them multiple times, to make sure that all the residents had a good time.

Our three aquariums are gone. The lease with the contractor expired after 5 years and the company came to pick them up. Due to the distance of the current contractor, it was not a good fit for us. We are

considering new contractors that are closer to us to replace the aquariums or possibly replacing it with an aviary instead.

**Comments from the Council:**

John Getz thanked everyone for what they do for our veterans and reminded everyone that they are the reason why we are here. He also stated that we can feel free to reach out to the Veterans of Foreign Wars if we need anything.

Thomas Brown complimented the staff for doing an outstanding job. He also requested that the committee send a letter to the political side of the house for their support and to attend the meetings or send a representative. Tom commented that John attends meetings in Harrisburg and sits in on committees and fights some of the bills and would be a good liaison if we needed.

Richard Doherty stated that things sound extremely positive and that everyone should be commended for the work that we are doing. He also stated that he was a little too late for this season, but he would like to put together a trip for the veterans next year to the Iron Pigs in Allentown where the residents would get their own space to watch the game and get an all-you-can-eat buffet for the day.

Ken Nadwodny joked that when he was here volunteering last week, that the mystery of what happened to the aquariums was a big topic.

Thomas Applebach seconded what everyone said and stated that there has been a positive atmospheric change since the start Covid.

Dan Kuper stated that Veterans Home week was outstanding and that the veterans had a great time.

Nikki Whitlock started by stating that the facility is in Senator Katie Muth's district and that she makes every effort to support the Southeastern Veterans Center. She was here when the Governor came to visit, and she played BINGO with the residents a few months ago. She cares very deeply for the residents. Nikki commented that her office can provide support letters for the DMVA's application for the Federal VA grant and that we could reach out to Chrissy Houlihan, as well. She also stated that Senator Muth recently toured Reading Area Community College and that their CNA program is looking for clinical sites for the practical experience part of their program. Brian Gula commented that we had started looking to being a potential clinical site for their Nurse Program and Nurse Aide Program, but due to some management changes on their end and our end, we just never connected. He did state that we are more than willing to participate in the program and be a potential clinical site. Nikki stated that she would be more than happy to pass that information along and help out with that. Also, Nikki asked if the new HR position would also be an advocate or liaison with the 2 labor unions. Barb Raymond replied that we are currently recruiting for the HR Analyst 3. We have an HR Analyst 2 who is the liaison with the unions.

Mike Belcher stated that he was at the Berks County Director of Veterans Affairs meeting, and they have a strategic partnership with the Reading Phillies and if we were interested, he could help connect us to get us to a game this year.

Nikki Whitlock also added that Senator Muth has her Veterans Expo on October 26<sup>th</sup> this year.



Robert Richardson asked if we could possibly get a respiratory care practitioner in the facility. He stated that he has noticed that we have several patients that have been given orders for respiratory treatments. Barb Raymond stated that we could definitely look into that, but unfortunately there is no funding stream for it. We could however look into the possibility of hiring a contracted person or looking at someone from our complement perspective. If we looked at it from the complement perspective, we would have to work with our labor unions because it is a nurse function to handle those types of things.

**Old Business:**

Nothing to Report.

**New Business:**

Nothing to Report.

**Election of Officers**

President – unanimous nominations and election of Barry Amole to serve as President.

Vice President – unanimous nominations and election of Mary Archey to serve as Vice President.

Secretary - unanimous nominations and election of Ken Schweitzer to serve as Secretary.

**Good of the Council:**

Nothing to Report.

**Time and Date for the next Meeting:**

With no further business to discuss, a motion was made to end the meeting. Motion carried. The next regular meeting of the Advisory Council will be held on October 10, 2024, at 10:00 a.m.

Approved:

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Kenneth Schweitzer, Secretary

Minutes submitted by: Sarah Klufas