

**GINO J. MERLI VETERANS' CENTER
ADVISORY COUNCIL MEETING
November 20, 2025**

CALL TO ORDER

Meeting was held both in person and via teleconference.

Bernard McDonald, Secretary, called the meeting to order at 10:00 am.

ROLL CALL

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

MEMBERS

Richard Wren, Catholic War Veterans

Wilson Miller, Resident Representative

Bernard "Bernie" McDonald, AMVETS

Russell Canevari, Veterans of Foreign Wars

Joe Sylvester, DAV

Tim Cleveland, PSACDVA

Robert Cudworth, Military Officers Association of America

Kyle Donahue, PA House of Representative

Timothy Booth, PSACDVA

William Smith, American Legion

Lisa Kaye, PSACDVA

DMVA

Maureen Weigl, BG, Deputy Adjutant General, VA

Travis Davis, Executive Director, Long-Term Care

Vito P. Ruggiero, Commandant

Kathleen Ambrose, Deputy Commandant

Erica Comine, Clinical Services Manager

Joseph Chiochio, Administrative Officer 5

OTHERS PRESENT / INTRODUCTION OF GUESTS

Daniel Kazmierski, Medical Director

Janice McAllister, Volunteer Coordinator

Michael Mecca, Admissions

Abigail Lynott, Recorder

Sarah Ruggiero, Quality Assurance

Samantha Frable, Clerk II

Sean O' Shea, Representing Kyle Donahue, PA House of Representative

MOMENT OF SILENCE

REVIEW OF MEMBER STATUS

REVIEW OF PREVIOUS MINUTES

- Previous minutes accepted as written.

REPORT OF THE DEPUTY ADJUTANT GENERAL

Deputy Adjutant General reported on the state and federal budgets and the potential impact on programs. DMVA experienced budget reductions across several areas, and leadership is currently reviewing the budget to determine any possible effects. Currently, there is no anticipated impact to programs, staffing, or benefits. Leadership will continue to monitor and provide updates on any areas that may be affected. Additionally, recent activity included Veterans Day events, upcoming Thanksgiving visits, and preparation for the Christmas holiday

season, during which senior leadership will visit all facilities. The team has remained busy across all areas, including reviewing how the Army transformation process may impact the Army Guard and Air Guard. Further details regarding budget impacts are expected in December.

REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF LONG-TERM CARE

Travis Davis Reported that the recent budget impasse has impacted routine Department of Health surveys, which are now resuming as the department works to catch up. Updated five-star ratings were reviewed, with Pennsylvania Soldiers' and Sailors' Home improving from a three-star to a four-star overall rating. Current ratings include Gino J. Merli Veterans' Center, Delaware Valley, and Erie as five-star facilities; Hollidaysburg and Southeast as four-star; and Southwest as three-star, with a combined system average of 4.3, exceeding national averages. From a respiratory illness standpoint, COVID cases remain low, with three residents and three staff affected across Hollidaysburg and Delaware Valley, and no flu or gastrointestinal outbreaks reported. Vaccination rates include over 40 percent of residents receiving the COVID vaccine and approximately 85 percent receiving the flu vaccine, while staff vaccination rates remain lower. Census and admissions data showed 1,184 residents in care, with 51 admissions and 48 discharges in October. Recruitment and retention efforts were discussed, including reapplication for the VA nurse recruitment grant and continued exploration of incentives such as regional pay. Personnel updates included the appointment of Dr. John Peacock as Medical Director at Delaware Valley and several retirements. Construction updates highlighted ongoing cosmetic improvements, the planned conversion of the former chapel into a canteen space, Hollidaysburg's construction nearing completion with an anticipated first-quarter opening next year, and a projected ribbon-cutting in spring. Act 20 requirements were reviewed, including advisory council composition changes and the development of a consolidated annual report, with upcoming meetings scheduled to review recommendations and standardize reporting. Additional updates included outreach and marketing efforts, Veterans Day and service birthday celebrations, and preparations for upcoming holiday visits and legislative tours.

REPORT OF THE COMMANDANT

Vito Ruggiero, recognized Kathleen Ambrose for her exceptional dedication and service, noting her role as a trusted advisor and her significant contributions to the organization and its veterans. Attendees were invited to a recognition event following the meeting to celebrate her accomplishments. Personnel updates included the introduction of Joseph Chiochio, who will assume the role of Deputy Commandant. Engagement initiatives were discussed, including a recent Connect and Learn session with staff that was well attended and produced constructive feedback. Ongoing facility construction projects and holiday wish list initiatives were referenced, with additional details to be provided by other presenters. Fundraising efforts were highlighted, including the annual golf tournament, which will fund the purchase of a new state-of-the-art bingo machine valued at over \$20,000 through support from the Fraternal Order of Police. A new community partnership with Odyssey Radio and local ShopRite stores was announced to support homeless veterans through the collection of food and hygiene items, with anticipated distribution of 10 to 12 pallets to shelters in Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties by the end of the month. Staff and community participation in support of this initiative was encouraged.

REPORT OF THE MEDICAL DIRECTOR

Daniel Kazmierski, The Medical Director, provided a brief medical summary for the last quarter, reporting that COVID and influenza activity remained very low. There were zero resident COVID cases and three non-severe staff cases, with no influenza cases reported among residents or staff. Vaccination data indicated that 118 residents received the 2025–2026 COVID vaccine, with no staff vaccinations, consistent with statewide trends, and 159 residents and 91 staff members received the flu vaccine. The facility currently has 22 residents with catheters, representing approximately 11 percent of the census, which is slightly above the target goal of 10 percent or less, and efforts continue to minimize catheter use. The Medical Director also discussed ongoing efforts to reduce psychotropic medication use when clinically appropriate through weekly pharmacy review meetings, where medications are evaluated resident by resident to balance benefits and potential side effects, with close monitoring following any changes. These practices align with state guidelines and support resident safety and quality of care.

THE GOOD OF THE COUNCIL

Kathleen Ambrose, Deputy Commandant, provided an update on ongoing construction projects throughout the facility, including work in the lobby, canteen, and chapel areas, noting that operations have required careful coordination to ensure continuity. The canteen is temporarily operating out of the former chapel, with supply storage being adjusted as construction progresses, and all projects are reported to be moving forward smoothly. New staff break rooms have been completed, with furniture currently being ordered. Kathleen acknowledged Joe as her successor, expressing confidence in his leadership and familiarity with the facility and residents. She extended her gratitude to current and former commandants, Fort Indiantown Gap leadership, and the Office of Administration team for their consistent support and responsiveness. Additional appreciation was shared for assistance in resolving a cable television issue to restore resident access to sports programming. Kathleen also recognized the dedication of all departments, including housekeeping, dietary, maintenance, admissions, volunteer services, activities, quality assurance, security, and nursing staff, highlighting the compassion and professionalism demonstrated in resident care. She concluded by thanking leadership and staff for their ongoing support and collaboration.

Joseph Chiochio introduced himself as the new Deputy Commandant, noting that he began his career at Gino J. Merli Veterans' Center eight years ago in the Quality Assurance Department, which will allow for a smooth transition into his new role.

Mike Mecca, Admissions Director, provided an update census, admissions, and outreach activities. The facility continues to operate at approximately 95 to 96 percent capacity, with 19 admissions and 17 discharges or expirations during the last quarter. With veteran beds nearing full capacity, the current waitlist for skilled nursing veterans is estimated at approximately six months, though it may fluctuate. Applicants were encouraged to submit applications proactively. For the secured unit, the wait time for veterans is approximately one year, while spouse-secured beds currently have availability and no waitlist. The estimated wait time for spouse applicants in other units is approximately eight months to one year. An admissions committee meets weekly to review applications and determine appropriate levels of care and placement. Outreach efforts included participation in a veteran pinning ceremony at Misericordia University, distribution of approximately 50 applications at community events, and engagement with American Legion District 11 and other regional organizations to expand awareness, particularly in the Back Mountain and Wayne County areas. Coordination with other state veterans' homes was

discussed, noting that veterans may be placed at another facility with available beds and later transferred when space becomes available locally, with transportation provided by the state as needed.

Janice McAllister, Volunteer Coordinator, reported that the first annual Purse Bingo event, held on October 18, raised \$13,000. The resident wish list included in the meeting packet reflects items being collected to meet resident needs and will be distributed on Christmas Day. The current Resident Welfare Fund balance was reported as \$168,908.62.

Bernard McDonald

Bernard McDonald, Secretary

2-19-26

Date