



SOUTHEASTERN VETERANS' CENTER ADVISORY COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES

July 13, 2023

The Southeastern Veterans' Center Advisory Council met July 13, 2023 at 10:00 AM in the All- Purpose Room at the Southeastern Veterans' Center.

Advisory Council Members Participating:

Barry Amole, Vietnam Veterans of America, President
Kenneth Schweitzer, American Legion, Secretary
Richard Doherty, Military Officers Association of America
Thomas Applebach, Lehigh County Office of Veterans' Affairs
Kenneth Nadwodny, Catholic War Veterans
Robert Richardson, Resident Representative
John Getz, Veterans of Foreign Wars
Thomas Brown, Veterans of Foreign Wars
The Hon. Tracy Pennycuick, PA State Senate
Daniel Kuper, Resident Representative

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

Maureen Weigl, BG (PA) – DMVA
Travis Davis, Executive Director, Long-Term Care - DMVA
Barbara Raymond, BVH Director – DMVA
Mike Hoover, Chief of Operations- DMVA
Josh Spigner, Regional Compliance Officer- DMVA
Erica Moore, Regional Program Outreach Coordinator- DMVA
Mike Belcher, Veteran Service Specialist- DMVA
Brian Gula, Commandant – SEVC
Lauren Stenson, Director of Nursing - SEVC
Jill Alwine, Admissions and Marketing Coordinator – SEVC
Sarah Klufas, Assistant to the Commandant - SEVC

Visitors:

Nikki Whitlock, Constituency Relations, Senator Katie Muth's Office
Lisa Walters, Chief of Staff, Senator Tracy Pennycuick's Office
Linda Neiman, Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary
Anna Brown

Excused Absence:

Mary Archey, Marine Corps League, Vice President
Jeffrey Elliot, PA AMVETS
Doug Forsythe, Disabled American Veterans
VACANT, PA House of Representatives
MG Mark J. Schindler, Adjutant General - DMVA
Robert Stone, American Legion

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.

Review and Approval of April 13, 2023 Meeting Minutes:

A motion was made by John Getz and seconded by Thomas Brown to approve the minutes of the Advisory Council Meeting held on April 13, 2023. Motion carried, and minutes were approved as written.

Report of the Medical Director:

Lauren Stenson, Director of Nursing, reported on behalf of Medical Director Dr. Monika VanSant. We are currently in our window for our Department of Health annual survey, so we have started doing some preparations. We have onboarded 3 nurses and 3 CNAs since the last Advisory Council meeting. We are currently recruiting for a full-time CRNP and another Assistant Director of Nursing, along with our continuous search for RNs, LPNs, and CNAs.

SEVC is moving forward on the collaboration with Reading Area Community College to become one of their clinical sites for their nursing program. We have another meeting with them next week. In addition, our nursing administration will be keeping an eye out for career fairs and other events at local colleges to attend to let our presence be known within the community.

We opened our 3 West unit of Coates Hall in May and are trying to fill as many of those beds as we can, while maintaining a healthy staff ratio for the facility.

Report of the Admissions and Marketing Coordinator:

Jill Alwine, Admissions Coordinator, provided the council with an admissions update. Jill reported that as of June 30, 2023, the facility had 201 residents, leaving us with 91 vacancies. The reasonings for the bed vacancies are due to staffing issues and our 3 East unit being reserved for quarantine. At this point we only have 2 available beds that we can fill, and we have admissions currently scheduled for them. Once we get a better complement of staff, we will be able to fill more beds. We have been working with the local VA medical centers to ensure we can get residents in here that need to be here. The Coatesville Medical Center recently closed one of their homeless buildings, so we received many referrals for our personal care unit and were able to admit some of those residents as well. There are currently 77 people on the waitlist, 64 veterans and 13 non-veterans/ spouses. The approximate waitlist times for skilled nursing and personal care are 3-6 months and 2-4 months, respectively. Our memory care unit is currently about a 15-18 month wait, due to it being our smallest area.

Richard Doherty asked Jill to repeat the waitlist times and wondered about how many admissions we do a year. Jill stated that year-to-date we have taken in about 36 admissions so far. Our waitlist is down from last year, which was about 120-150 people. Richard Doherty stated that he does not believe that the community knows much about our state veterans' homes and asked that we provide handouts to him to pass along. Thomas Applebach stated that the DMVA has 2 trifolds that provides information on our homes. Jill Alwine stated that if anyone wants pamphlets about our home, that she can provide those after the meeting. She also stated that we do attend expos and work with social workers in the community to try and get the word out and educate everyone the best we can.

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

General Weigl began by welcoming Senator Pennycuick to the council.

Gen Weigl stated that we are sitting at a census of about 1051 across all 6 homes. At the beginning of the year, we started at about 950.

Gen Weigl also wanted to offer kudos to her team and Christine, the new Commandant at Hollidaysburg. Construction for the new building at Hollidaysburg has been ongoing. Unfortunately, earlier this week while they were digging, they cut all the powerlines. Two buildings were affected, and some residents needed to be evacuated to the VA. Generators were brought in to keep the power going. Greg Lehman and the maintenance team were up all night working with the contactors to fix the issues. There were also other organizations in the community like Sheetz and Walmart that pitched in to help where they could.

Gen Weigl informed the council that Senator Pennycuick, who was in attendance, started a women's health taskforce initiative and signed into legislation Women's Veteran's Day to be celebrated on June 12th. Two pieces of legislation that are still pending are the increase in the paralyzed and blind pensions, going anywhere from 150 to 200 or even 250.

We are continuing to educate veterans in the community about the PACT ACT. We really want to try and get the word out. We will gladly come to your local chapters and sit down and talk about the benefits and even bring our mobile vans to help people do their claims. When we are in those smaller environments, we can have more intimate conversations and really determine what people need. We are also reaching out to all the homes to make sure that residents and staff know about their claims and benefits.

Kenneth Nadwodny stated that he has been receiving calls from spouses and children of veterans asking about what they can do for their loved one when they are incapacitated. Gen Weigl stated that we are trying to work on campaigns that put the word out about these programs to a broader demographic, including these caregivers. Thomas Applebach stated that there is a county office of veterans' affairs in every county in PA and his advice to everyone is to direct these people to call their county office for guidance. He also stated that the VA is mailing letters about the PACT ACT and the additional benefits to all the veterans in their system, and that they are getting a lot of calls from people inquiring about it.

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

Travis Davis started off by introducing Mike Hoover, Chief Operating Officer for the veterans' homes. Regarding the incident at Hollidaysburg, we had to utilize our Emergency Management plans. Our staff are trained on these each year and, although we hope to never have to use them, we did on Monday. The team responded very well, and all the residents were kept safe. We had 245 residents on campus when this happened, about 174 were potentially affected and we had plans in place to transport and place 147 residents at one point. Fortunately, we were able to restore power to some parts of the campus and we only had to relocate 19 residents to our local VA. Mike Hoover met with the team at Hollidaysburg and they discussed what went well, what we could improve on, and where communication can be improved in case this happens in the future. We are going to roll this out to all our facilities, so we are even better prepared to handle something like this in the future. The other 5 homes are equipped with newer generators where, if we ran into a similar issue here, the generators would be able to handle more than just your basic lifesafety measures. Because we are putting up the new building at Hollidaysburg, their system was not upgraded at that time. We expect to be back on utilities there by the end of next week.

We have had over 20 inspections from outside agencies take place across the 6 homes. In addition to that, the DMVA has also completed facility performance appraisals at 5 of our 6 homes.

Travis informed the council that we are going to be posting the Advisory Council minutes on the DMVA website to increase our transparency. They were posted years ago, but throughout Covid and everything, it has fallen by the wayside. After the meetings, a draft version of the minutes will be posted online. Once the minutes have been approved at the next meeting, they will be moved to an approved final status.

The state budget still has not passed. We do not quite know what it means for us and long-term care. We believe what we will likely see is a 1% increase for Medicaid. This could change, but this is what our advocacy groups and membership groups believe will happen. If that does happen, we will have some concerns, especially with the 17.5% increase last year for Medicaid. Our operating costs have significantly increased due to staffing shortages, increases in PPD, and the DOH increasing our minimum staffing requirements. So, depending on where the state budget goes next year, if we see a moderate to low increase in Medicaid, our question is where is that funding coming from to sustain year 2 of the increase. We typically staff higher than the state minimums, so we feel comfortable that we will be in compliance with the new ratios. However, it could limit our ability to fill our beds to some degree.

Thomas Applebach asked who sets the ratios. Travis replied that right now they are state governed, so the Department on Health sets those ratios, but CMS is looking at a minimum for the nation. Nothing has been passed yet. Thomas Applebach asked why they are increasing the ratios. Senator Pennycuick stated that there is a bill in the House and the Senate to require staffing minimums. Travis stated that we are in a good position right now with our ratios as we staff higher due to our population. However, we do not believe in a 'one-size fits all' approach to staffing. Senator Pennycuick agreed that one-size does not fit all and that is a huge issue, especially when we have such a nursing shortage.

Out of the 6 homes, there are 3 homes that are 5- star facilities, Delaware Valley, Gino Merli, and Erie. Our Hollidaysburg and Southwestern facilities are currently ranked at 4-stars, and Southeastern is currently a 3-star facility. There is currently no covid among residents or staff. Currently, we have a waitlist of 263 veterans and spouses from across the state. Recruitment and retention remain our biggest challenge. Our total complement for all 6 veterans' homes is just under 2200 and we currently have several hundred vacant positions. We are still hosting events, such as the Walk-in Wednesdays, to help recruit for these vacant positions. In each home about 30% of beds remain vacant and that is mainly due to staffing. The issue is not that we do not have enough staff to care for our veterans, it is that we do not have enough staff to fill all the beds.

Regarding some key positions, we recently named a new Commandant for the Hollidaysburg facility. We also have a new Director of Nursing at the Delaware Valley facility, and we are actively recruiting for additional help on the physician's service side here at Southeastern.

Senator Pennycuick stated that if Travis sends her the vacancies that she will post them on her webpage and her e-blast.

John Getz asked why Southeastern is only rated a 3-star facility. Brian Gula stated that he will talk a little more about that during his report.

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

Barbara Raymond started by stating that since we last met, the public health emergency has ended. The vaccine mandate will officially be ending as of August 6th. However, the CMS has stated that they will not enforce the vaccine mandates prior to it ending. Right now, we are not including the vaccine mandate on any of our job postings. We were hoping to a slight uptick in the number of applications we received for our postings once it was removed. We have not seen this yet, but we did just take it off.

We are currently monitoring a strain of the Covid Omicron virus called XBB. It has been in the states since the fall timeframe. It is currently not the dominant strain, but it has been in the news lately. Unfortunately, this strain is pushing past immunities from having covid prior as well as those that are vaccinated. We have gone about 2 weeks since anyone at our homes has been Covid positive and about 3 months since any major outbreaks. Come the fall time, we are expecting to see an increase in cases just like with influenza. We had no influenza deaths this year and only 1 death attributed to Covid, although it was not the primary cause.

We did have new Department of Health regulations come into effect as of July 1, 2023. One of those regulations as mentioned prior was the increase in the staffing ratios. The other regulatory changes were primarily in line with CMS. At the homes we have gone through and updated our policies and procedures so that we are fully compliant with the new state regulations that just took effect.

Since we last met, we celebrated Nurses' Week, CNA Week, and Veterans Home week. Brian will touch on this more in this report.

In addition to the power outage at the Hollidaysburg facility, the Department of Health came in that day to the facility to conduct their annual survey. They were kind enough to step out and return the next day. In the end, they decided to exit and not conduct the survey this week. We are guessing they will be back sometime in the near future, probably next week.

Robert Richardson stated that he has yet to hear of anyone getting a PPD. Barbara Raymond stated that our rules are a little bit different. Upon admission or hire, you receive them. However, unless your county is in a high TB area, we are only required to check for symptoms. You should be asked about symptoms on an annual basis.

Report of the Commandant – Brian Gula– SEVC:

Brian Gula stated that along with his report, he will be giving an update on construction projects for Mildred as she is out on a planned leave.

To address the question posed earlier by John Getz, Southeastern is currently at a 3-star rating. This is a national rating system for all nursing homes and the information is available to the public. The three major categories that this rating is broken into is quality measures, health inspections, and staffing. Our current rating is really driven by the outcome of our health inspections. Currently, SEVC is at a 5-star rating for staffing, 3- star rating for quality measures, and 2-star for health inspections. Scores are refreshed quarterly. The good news is that when scores refresh in July, we will return to a 4-star rating. The issue is health inspections affect your star rating for 3 years. Every time the facility receives a deficiency, the deficiency is assigned a certain number of points based on the severity. The more points you have, the worse your star rating is for health inspections, the lesser amount of points you have, the better your star rating is. Back in June 2020, at the beginning of Covid, our facility unfortunately had a very tough survey and received 156 points for this survey. So come the refresh in

July, after that 3-year mark, those points will be dropped from our rating. In response to a follow-up question asked by John Getz, Brian further explained that during that survey, the facility received one of the highest severity levels for infection control and our protocols.

Travis Davis stated that of the 3 categories that the star ratings are based upon, most of are facilities are at a 5-star for staffing and we are really trying to focus on the quality measure piece. We have a quality team that helps support the quality teams at the homes and we are seeing improvements on those quality measure scores as well.

General Weigl reiterated that the surveys are public, and anyone can review the information and see what type of deficiencies a home has received. She stated that deficiencies can be in many different areas such as food not being at the right temperature, calendars for resident events not being updated, etc. It is not all lifesafety or neglect issues. Furthermore, she told the council that if anyone has any concerns or would like to view the findings of the health inspection surveys, that they can reach out to us, and we can direct them to where the results can be found or even offer explanations if there are ever any questions.

Construction project updates: We will be installing a security gate on Brown Drive to help prevent unauthorized vehicles from coming onto the property. Security will also be able to monitor the gates via a camera and even open the gates to allow vehicles in. If the gate is closed, staff will be able to open the gate with a swipe of their employee badge. We have plans to have one placed at the top of the hill on Dunlap Drive if all goes well.

We are currently replacing all numbered keypads in our CLC building with badge readers as well to enhance security and make sure that residents or unauthorized personnel are not learning the codes and able to access areas they are not supposed to.

Another big project coming up is the renovation of our staff break rooms. We will be renovating all the staff break rooms in both buildings including new floors, ceilings, fixtures, furniture, etc. We are currently getting staff input on what they would like to see in their breakrooms.

To reiterate what Lauren Stenson said, we are currently in our window for our annual Department of Health survey. We have audits and processes in place to prepare for that. We had our VA survey back in February. We were cited for a few minor items. We continue to work on our corrective action plan. There is education and auditing taking place and we will shortly present all this back to the VA in hopes it is approved and that we are placed back in compliance with their regulations.

We have filled 2 key positions since our last meeting, our Activities Director and our Facility and Grounds Director. We are very excited to have them onboard and are confident that they will be an asset to our staff and SEVC.

ADHC update: at our last meeting we received our Occupancy Permit, so we are finally able to utilize the space. We have been using it for staff meetings, trainings, and we used it to host our job fair. We are also looking into using it for a CNA training course.

We had a great month of June celebrating Nurses' week, CNA week, and Veterans Home week. Nurses' week and CNA week were filled with giveaways, games, gift basket raffles, all provided by staff, pizza, and other yummy treats. For Veterans Home week, our amazing Activities department and Volunteer

department put on a carnival with a pie-eating contest and dunk tank, Luau and pig roast, big prize Bingo and many more events!

Barb Raymond made sure to reiterate that the state is not permitted to use our state budget to do all the staff appreciation things, so everything that took place during those weeks was donated by SEVC staff.

Gen Weigl also mentioned we will be hosting a 100th birthday party in September for one of our World War II veterans who is in personal care. Nikki Whitlock mentioned that as a resident of SD44, they can provide a Senate Citation for his 100th birthday.

John Getz asked if they would have any issues coming in with the new security gates that will be installed. Brian Gula responded that we are going to see how everything goes, but we will most likely have them open during normal business hours. However, if they are closed for any reason, you will be able to ring a buzzer and someone at the security desk will be able to let you in. We are installing the first one on Brown Drive to test everything and see how it goes. Barb asked if we will be using pressure pads that will open the gate on the way out like some of the other homes have. Brian is not sure yet on all the details.

Compliance Update:

Josh Spigner provided a short compliance update. Currently, the exclusion checks that are being run at the homes are being done by staff at each home. We are trying to get on the Justifacts contract so we can automate this process and run the exclusion checks in a less cumbersome way. Josh also mentioned that the compliance team is doing contractual compliance reviews for Benchmark and Vistamed to make sure the contracts are being followed.

Comments from the Council:

Thomas Brown stated that everyone here is doing a fine job. Furthermore, he wanted to tell everyone to not lose sight of our main goal: helping veterans, including those out in the community that need our help. This should not only be a goal in our working lives, but in our personal lives as well.

Senator Tracy Pennycuick reiterated that they just passed the resolution for the Women Veteran's Health Taskforce, so they will be looking over the next 18 months at the women veterans in Pennsylvania and what they are getting for healthcare. She is hoping that taskforce will come up with recommendations to the federal VA to supply more money for the choice program. Additionally, there are some legislative actions, one is to remove the wartime service from the real estate tax exemption. That has been ongoing in several different ways, and we are trying to make that happen. There is also have a bill coming out that would lower the assessment on your real estate for tax purposes. Senator Pennycuick suggested adding informational briefs in the tax bills to help get information out there.

John Getz commented that the VFW has a retreat every year and this past year they had 165 women veterans attend. They are hoping to have another retreat in March. Overall, these retreats are very productive and many of the female veterans are learning a lot about healthcare benefits that they can take advantage of. He concluded by stating that everyday is Veterans Day.

Richard Doherty reiterated that everyone needs to push to get the word out to communities, but overall, he thinks everyone is doing an amazing job. He asked for clarification on the 100th birthday celebration. Richard also asked how old the veterans homes system is. Jill Alwine stated that this building opened in

1986 but was not fully operational until about 1991-1992. Gen Weigl stated that Delaware Valley just celebrated their 20th anniversary and Southwestern will be celebrating their 25th anniversary soon. Anna Brown comment that she used to come here to play Bingo back in the 1970s, it was a VA hospital at the time.

Robert Richardson stated that he has been noticing that there is nothing in the state for the Native Americans. He was wondering if we planned on doing anything or looking into that. Gen Weigl answered that there are some programs offered by the Federal VA that we push out, but the state has not done their own Native American function. She said she will look into doing something for Pennsylvania.

Nikki Whitlock stated that they are in the middle of planning Senator Muth's Annual Veteran's Expo. They are shooting for the fall and will let everyone know when there is a date nailed down.

Erica Moore introduced herself and stated that in the fall, they will be making visits to the local VFWs and American Legions to provide info to the community about various programs.

Old Business:

Nothing to Report.

New Business:

Nothing to Report.

Election of Officers:

President -- unanimous nominations and election of Barry Arnole 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 12, 2023 at 10:00 a.m.

Approved:

Kenneth Schweitzer
Kenneth Schweitzer, Secretary

Minutes submitted by: Sarah Klufas