Pennsylvania Soldiers' and Sailors' Home

Advisory Council Meeting

Erie, Pennsylvania

December 9, 2021

9:00a.m.

ADVISORY COUNCIL MEMBERS PRESENT

Mr. Eric Cepek, Director, Veterans Office

Mr. David Price, Military Order of the Purple Heart

Mr. Harry E. Stewart, American Legion

Mr. Robert C. Eiler, Veterans of Foreign Wars

Mr. William Rose, PSSH Resident Council President

Mr. Gary Fry, AMVETS

Mr. Richard Supak, Catholic War Veterans

The Honorable Daniel Laughlin, PA Senator

ADVISORY COUNCIL MEMBERS ABSENT

Mr. Raymond J. Chambers, Vice President, Marine Corps League

Mr. Richard DiGiacomo, Secretary, Military Officers Assoc. of America

Mr. Anthony DiGiacomo, County Director of Veterans Affairs

Mr. Walter Simpson, Disabled American Veterans

The Honorable Curt Sonney, PA House of Representatives

Mr. Thaddeus Plasczynski, Director of Veterans Affairs

OTHERS PRESENT

Mrs. Barbara Raymond, RN, NHA, Director of Veterans' Homes

Ms. Cheri Spacht, RN, PSSH DON

Mrs. Elizabeth Seibert, PSSH Deputy Commandant

Mrs. Pamela Jenkins, Admissions Director

Ms. Regina Smith for Honorable Daniel Laughlin, PA Senator

Ms. Ashley for Honorable Patrick Toomey, PA Senator

Mr. Ken Vybiral, PSSH Volunteer Coordinator

Ms. Alyssa Cooley, Recording Secretary

CALL TO ORDER

Ms. Alyssa Cooley called the meeting to order at 0901 via teleconference.

MOMENT OF SILENT AND PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Ms. Alyssa Cooley led a moment of silence and the Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

ROLL CALL

Ms. Alyssa Cooley took roll call for all present.

SWEARING IN OF COUNCIL MEMBERS

No Council Members were sworn in.

APPROVAL OF PREVIOUS MEETING MINUTES

The minutes were approved from the prior meeting.

MEDICAL DIRECTOR UPDATE

Mrs. Elizabeth Seibert stated that Dr. Eric Milie had no report to share but is consistently available to the clinical team as need be.

ADMISSIONS AND MARKETING UPDATE

Mrs. Pamela Jenkins provided update:

We are bringing in admissions currently. They have been slowed down somewhat. We are experiencing, as nationally they are, a staffing issue. In order for us to provide proper care to our veterans, we have to ensure our staffing levels are appropriate to put these admissions on our covid yellow zone. They each go to a quarantine regardless of vaccination status right now. We are accepting and reviewing applications daily and that in-turn is helping build our waitlist. We do have available beds and we want nothing more than to provide service to our veterans out there by filling these beds as soon as possible.

As far as marketing, I recently devised a list of every hospital, nursing care facility, personal care home and shelter within the six counties that we outreach too. I sent letters and applications to all these facilities. We are receiving some feedback. In the rural counties, we are finding that these individuals don't even know we exist. I intend to follow up with them and their social workers. We have been able to assist three veterans over the last few months from these areas. At the personal care homes, we're finding are closing due to the pandemic right now. I just actually received a phone call yesterday from a personal care home here in Erie that are referring two additional veterans to me. That's where we sit.

Any questions? There were no questions.

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF VETERANS' HOMES

Mrs. Barbara Raymond provided updates for the Deputy Adjutant General, the Executive Director of Long-term Care and the Director of Veterans' Homes.

I will give everyone kind of a brief update on where we are across the six Homes. Good news to report, we have no influenza cases at any of our facilities. We've only had two total cases over the six Veterans'

Homes', and everybody is currently negative, we don't have anybody with symptoms. So, we are very happy there.

Covid numbers, we're actually doing pretty well with covid as well. We've got two of our facilities with positive cases. We have seven individual residents that are positive for covid. Mixture of vaccinated and unvaccinated, but all of them are stable. A few of them have minor sniffles, that kind of thing, but nobody is in any type of critical condition at all right now. So, we are very happy there as well.

Our vaccine status overall, the residents are at 99% vaccinated across all six Homes and we are 75% of our staff overall that are vaccinated. Our two facilities that have the lower numbers are our Altoona facility and our Erie facility, but we're really moving forward with encouraging the staff to get vaccinated. We were making some headway with the CMS mandate that had been in effect up until just a couple of weeks ago. We were getting quite a few additional vaccinations. We actually went from about 65% of our staff overall up to 75% of our staff. So, we were making some headway and then the mandate got that injunction put on it right at the moment. We're keeping an eye on it to see if that's going to pop out of the courts through the appeal process or not. A good majority of our unvaccinated were indeed getting exemptions for not receiving the vaccine. So, I don't know if we will ever get to 100% through a full vaccination process, but we do still keep encouraging our staff to go through the vaccination process.

Booster wise, a vast majority of our residents and staff that were fully vaccinated did indeed go through the booster process already. As of now, the CDC is not stating a booster is required for full vaccination but there is already talk about that being changed to needing a booster to be considered fully vaccinated, but that's not currently the guidance. So, again, we're just encouraging everybody to get vaccinated and their boosters.

We are tracking the antivirals that are coming out and have some headway with the FDA. Nothing right now is under an emergency use authorization. However, we are continuing to follow that. An FDA advisory panel did recently recommend using one of the antivirals, and its with the FDA for actual approval for the emergency use. So, we are keeping an eye on that.

All six of our Homes are fully licensed. We don't have anybody on a provisional license. Our Gino J. Merli facility up in Scranton recently underwent their full Department of Health inspection. They're waiting on their final results, but no concerns. They have maybe just a couple of deficient practices.

As far as the holidays, we are across the six Homes, gearing up for the Adjutant General visits along with a few members of the National Guard in each of the areas. We're going to keep it a little bit lighter than we have in the past years, but our goal is to get him in to see the Vets. They really do enjoy those visits. So, those will be occurring within the next couple of weeks, barring of course any unforeseen circumstances.

As far as visitation goes, that was also something new that came out of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. We are back open to visitation. That happened just before the Thanksgiving holiday and so far, we really have not seen any major outbreaks through the increase in that visitation, but we of course are following all infection control processes and standards.

Construction is ongoing at various locations. Our Gino Merli facility has their roof being redone. Our Pittsburgh facility is undergoing some infrastructure type changes, updating our boilers and that sort of things. Erie is of course undergoing major renovations, but I'll let Beth touch on that effort a little bit.

The other thing we are doing, we are partnering with the VA. We are working with them closely on anything we can do for our veterans that are on waiting lists that can't come into us. We're working with the VA to see if any of these individuals may need some home-based community care or palliative care that they may not be signed up on. So, we're working with the VA on those processes and getting a little bit of an easier transition process for anybody that's waiting on any of our six Homes that need to come in. Pam did mention the staffing challenges are a concern across the Commonwealth at all six of our Homes as well as across the nation. Thankfully, our six Homes, we are all still doing okay. We do have enough staff to care for the veterans that we have on hand. So, the concern is not for the folks that we have and our taking care of, it's more of how many more residents and veterans can we take in off of the waiting list. So, all six Homes are taking things very slowly and very strategically with their admission process.

Any questions? There were no questions.

REPORT OF THE COMMANDANT

Mrs. Elizabeth Seibert provided update:

The Erie facility, again right now, we are in the process of bringing 13 candidates in. They have been recently hired and are working through the process. We do have a total of 36 positions that are open right now. The majority of those positions are in the LPN job classification and the nursing assistants. We did recently receive a wage adjustment that was made. We anticipate a real positive outcome related to that. We are seeing additional folks that are coming in and showing some interest in employment. So, hopefully that will be really positive for us.

From a census end, specifically with regards to the unit, again unit E which is down on our ACU, that 12 bed unit is dedicated for covid as we may need it for either red or yellow. Right now, there's no occupancy down there, which is a really good thing. On the whole campus, again, we have zero covid cases in our resident population, which is a huge difference in comparison to last year at this time. So, some of the mitigation efforts are certainly making a huge difference and impact year over year. We do have on unit D, which is within our dementia unit, we have as of December 6th, 16 beds that are filled and occupied. We do have individuals that are on the waiting list for that unit, both veterans and non-veterans and a mix between male and female in the non-veteran population.

On the nursing side of the facility, we have 58 residents that are being cared for between unit A and B. we do have individuals that are on the active waiting list. Six are male veterans and 8 are female non-veterans.

On our Personal Care side, we are taking care of 55 individuals over on that unit. We do have three individuals on the waiting list. One is a male veteran and three are female non-veterans. As Pam mentioned, we'll work toward trying to serve all those individuals. It is very strategic making sure that who we bring in we have the appropriate care and services, that really is a priority. We are impacted on the PCU side for census growth in part because of the renovations that are underway on that unit. The PCU side is under renovations that involve all of the bathrooms and its one heck of a project. If you guys

aren't aware, the facility is 135 years old and there doing a renovation that is going to really be wonderful. They are going, not just for an individual bathroom, but working on all the plumbing associated with the whole trunk of that plumbing section going down to the basement all the way to the upstairs. So, as you can imagine, we have to make sure that we do that renovation on all the bathrooms in different phases. We're in phase one right now and there are five phases associated with that renovation.

Over on the NCU side, the dining room, gym, satellite kitchen, that whole area of the nursing home side is also under renovations. If you have a chance to do a drive by, you'll notice the footprint of that part of the facility has been enlarged and its quite the initiative. Lots of work being done there. The impact on resident population has been pretty minimal. We've been trying to adjust and use different physical planned spaces to accommodate some of the services that need to be maintained throughout the renovations. The residents and the staff have been very flexible and very accommodating in making sure things like therapy services still are maintained within the facility. It might be a different location, but its still services that are being rendered throughout the renovations.

Also, in the front of the NCU on the outside of units A and B, they have started the construction for enclosing some of the courtyard space in front of those areas. Once that's completed, it will offer the residents and the families nice sidewalks to be able to ambulate and go around and visit and have some level of additional security when they go off the patios to be able to enjoy some outdoor engagement. So, all very wonderful things once they're all completed. We're working through them as need be through the construction of it.

One thing I do want to mention, and with Ken on the phone, I'd love for him to mention on December 18th, we are in full planning mode for Wreaths Across America. Its been a wonderful engagement for our residents and community. I'm going to ask Ken Vybiral our Volunteer Coordinator to speak to the festivities related to that.

Are there any questions for me?

Mr. William Rose: I would add one more thing to that list, the park currently has bridge construction back there and there is a lot of construction equipment back in the cemetery also.

Mrs. Elizabeth Seibert: Yes, thank you Will. Will mentions the project, its actually the PennDOT project in the back of the campus. Which is the bridge project going over to the blockhouse. That construction and project continues through the PennDOT effort. Thank you Will.

Any other questions for me?

Mr. Gary Fry: I have a question about security with all that construction going on back there. Is there going to be access for people coming on the campus?

Mrs. Elizabeth Seibert: Yes. At this point are access to our campus comes through one gate location and we have security that manages that 24/7. So, at this point in time, our campus continues to have the security oversight through one point of entrance.

Any other questions?

REPORT OF THE COUNCIL MEMBERS

Mr. Harry Stewart provided report:

This afternoon I'm delivering a check for the residents for $2,175.00 which is $15.00 per resident from the Pennsylvania American Legion, the Auxiliary, and the Son's of the American Legion. We would like to wish everybody a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

Mrs. Barbara Raymond: Thank you!

Mr. Robert Eiler provided report:

On the minutes last meeting, it was brought up about Sharing and Caring. I want to report that our long-time president has passed away, Bob Abbot. Joe Milnac is the new president. He was the long-term vice president. We are up and running. We were all ready for the residents to join us on the boat ride, but as we all know, everybody cancelled last minute, but we were all ready for you. We had all the bags packed and the boat secured, and we regret that you people had to cancel but we were there ready for you.

Mrs. Barbara Raymond: Next year Bob! We are doing it next year!

Mr. Robert Eiler: I sure hope so. That's two years in a row, what a disappointment. We work all year, very hard, to get ready for those veterans to come on board. Its not only a disappointment to our residents that want to come, its more of a disappointment for our staff. We all volunteer and never get paid a nickel. Everything goes to Sharing and Caring. We really miss those veterans. That's all I have.

William Rose provided report:

I'm not sure if this should come under new business or not but I'll just cover it right now.

The PCU Dom Resident Council has noted our residents concern regarding the use of our chapel to conduct business meetings. We feel that it is no more appropriate to conduct business in the House of Faith than it was when Jesus threw the Money Changers out of the Temple of Solomon almost two thousand years ago. It is no more appropriate than holding physical therapy, resident council, or recreational sessions there. We feel it is insensitive to the convictions of the Homes faithful and was conducted without the resident's full knowledge or consideration.

Resident Comments:

There are two conference rooms already set aside for such meetings, use those. Also, change the open hours back to what they were previous to the installation of the conference room equipment.

There are a number of questions from the residents, and you might be surprised to find out that they are baby boomers concerning medical marijuana. Setting aside my personal feelings about a bunch of pot heads stinking up our Home with skunk weed, I need to note that our residents do have questions regarding the use of medical marijuana. We are all aware of the reasons why it is currently not an option, given the disconnect between federal law, medical professionals, and the Veterans Administration.

Resident Comments

The resident comments on this are, what are we doing, what are you doing and what is being done to change the laws concerning this issue. We find it ironic that Pennsylvania civilians have a medical option that our resident veterans who have served their country are denied.

The last item that I have is concerning the future here. I would like to say as a PCU Dom Resident Council President, I do my very best to conglomerate, articulate and accurately represent the consensus opinions of my fellow residents. Having said that, my term as President is about to expire and I would like to use this opportunity to pursue a personal agenda of mine.

Statistically in the time it takes to hold this meeting a younger American Veteran has committed suicide. Not forgetting Korea, the two longest American Wars were fought in Afghanistan and Iraq. Among other things, the generation of military personnel who served there grew up with a cell phone and internet. They don't know what a rotary phone is and think a party line is a political statement. They were raised with 24/7 365 television and a video game controller in their hand. They weren't anywhere when President Kennedy was assassinated but can tell you where they were for 9/11. They are unaware that a happy ending properly belongs at the end of a book or a movie. Having said that, I would encourage this committee to start thinking now about the next generation of veterans who will be showing up on our doorstep. Barbara maybe can talk a little more about this, the one third times three work program that she oversaw here at our Erie Home. It would be a good start for our younger veterans coming here. Accessing 9/11 G.I. Bill benefits via the internet, classes and etcetera at the home would be helpful and a good start. More hands-on resident activities will be in demand. Hunting, fishing, perhaps a woodshop, more outdoor excursions, and active exercises for a younger set of veterans showing up here would be appreciated.

Any questions? There were no questions.

Mr. Richard Supak provided report:

I would like to wish everyone a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. And let's hope 2022 is better than this year.

OLD BUSINESS

Mrs. Barbara Raymond provided report:

My vacant Commandant up in Erie. I did complete interviews, did not make any selections yet. I do have an individual that I'm looking at and will hopefully have an answer for our vacant Commandant in the near future. Say a little prayer for me on that one.

NEW BUSINESS

Mr. Ken Vybiral provided report:

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, this Ken Vybiral, Volunteer Coordinator at the Soldiers' and Sailors' Home. Thank you for the opportunity to speak on our Wreaths Across America event. Once again, we are proud to carry on the tradition of this national endeavor. It will once again occur on Saturday December 18th. As we did last year, we will be following covid-19 mitigation protocols. Volunteers will begin to place wreaths at 0800. Volunteer groups will be scheduled in at every half an hour up until noon where we will conclude with the nationally choreographed moment of silence. I want to extend my gratitude to several of the organizations. Those that are on the call that have supported both financially and in person to contribute to this event. We are excited and looking forward to another successful event this year.

Any questions?

Mr. Gary Fry: Regarding Wreaths Across America, is that a logistical nightmare to try and fund that thing? I know up here where I live, we have three small cemeteries and that's quite a project. I wonder how they go about funding something as big as that project out there?

Mr. Ken Vybiral: I would say in the beginning it was, yes. As we were kind of first getting established with the tradition. Its been really a labor of love to kind of see the community support grow over the years. Once we began our establishment of the program, its been really exciting to see the participation and the contributions come in year after year. So, the long and short answer I guess is, yes, at the beginning it was a bit of a nightmare, but now I feel like we're in a good place and we have it supported in a good way.

Mr. Gary Fry: Well, that's good. I have a special interest in Wreaths Across America myself. Just curious on how that got taken care of. Sounds like everything is running good. Thank you.

GOOD OF THE COUNCIL

Mrs. Barbara Raymond: Has anyone thought about volunteering to be President of our Advisory Council? And/or does anyone want to make nominations? Okay, hearing none, I know you all very well so I may volunteer someone. Gary Fry, welcome back. I can't nominate. Would anyone like to nominate Gary Fry?

Gary Fry: Will me being in Florida for two months interfere with this?

Mrs. Barbara Raymond: No, not at all.

Gary Fry: Okay, I would be happy to do it. I been on the board two other times and I kind of know what's going on.

Mrs. Barbara Raymond: Hearing that Gary will accept the charge of a nomination, does anybody nominate Gary?

Mr. Robert Eiler: Yes, I make a motion to nominate Gary Fry.

Mr. Richard Supak: I second that motion.

All were in favor, none were opposed. Gary Fry announced as the new President of the Advisory Council.

ADJOURNMENT

Meeting was adjourned at 0940.

The next Advisory Council Meeting is scheduled for Thursday, March 10, 2022 at 0900. Meeting may be in person or teleconference, to be determined.