



## SOUTHEASTERN VETERANS' CENTER ADVISORY COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES

April 11, 2024

The Southeastern Veterans' Center Advisory Council met April 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  
Mary Archey, Marine Corps League, Vice 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  
Robert Richardson, Resident Representative  
The Honorable Tracy Pennycuick, PA State Senate- **via Microsoft TEAMS**

### 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  
Michael Belcher, Veterans' Services Specialist- DMVA  
Michelle Copeland, Social Work Coordinator- DMVA  
Brian Gula, Commandant – SEVC  
Mildred Butler-Coleman, Deputy Commandant- SEVC  
Dr. Sin Kei Yeung, Medical Director- SEVC  
Lauren Stenson, Director of Nursing - 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  
The Honorable Katie Muth  
Nikki Whitlock, Chief of Staff, Senator Katie Muth's Office  
Lisa Walters, Chief of Staff, Senator Tracy Pennycuick's Office- **via Microsoft TEAMS**  
Terra Shaner, Geriatrics and Extended Care Services Business Manager, CVAMC- **via Microsoft TEAMS**

### Excused Absence:

Jeffrey Elliot, PA AMVETS  
Thomas Brown, Veterans of Foreign Wars  
John Getz, Veterans of Foreign Wars  
Thomas Coreau, Dauphin County Office of Veterans' Affairs  
The Honorable Dan Williams, PA House of Representatives  
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:**

Ken Schweitzer, American Legion, and Mary Archey, Marine Corps League, were re-appointed to the board and sworn in by General Maureen Weigl.

### **Review and Approval of January 11, 2024, Meeting Minutes:**

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

### **Report of the Medical Director:**

Dr. Sin Kei Yeung introduced herself and told the council about her educational background. Dr. Yeung completed her undergraduate degree at the University of Maryland, College Park and did her medical school training at Medical College of Virginia (now known as Virginia Commonwealth University, Medical College of Virginia). She also completed her internal medicine training at UMDNJ in New Brunswick, NJ, and her Geriatric Fellowship at St. Vincent's in New York. She has been practicing in the Delaware County area for about 14 years in various settings including outpatient, family practice, and nursing homes.

Lauren Stenson, Director of Nursing, gave a medical update for the facility on behalf of Dr. Yeung. Over the past month, we have had a little bit of a Covid outbreak. We had at most 4 residents on our quarantine unit. We are currently clear of any Covid positive residents and are finishing up outbreak testing on one of our floors. So far, we have not had any more positives as a result of this outbreak testing. We are also on the tail end of a Norovirus outbreak. The facility did a wonderful job of identifying residents that were experiencing symptoms and created a protocol where we monitored residents and put them into contact precautions to minimize the spread. We are watching 6 residents at the moment.

We are working on consents for the 2023-2024 Covid vaccine. The nice thing about this one is that it comes in single-dose vials, whereas before we had to closely coordinate distribution for 300 doses at a time. We are still providing flu, RSV, and the Fall Covid vaccines. The reason we are still providing the Fall Covid vaccine is because we had the outbreak in October, and we were not allowed to administer vaccines for 90 days after those residents tested positive. We are catching up on those vaccinations before we move on.

### **Report of the Admissions and Marketing Coordinator:**

Jill Alwine, Admissions Coordinator, provided the council with an admissions update. Jill reported that our census as of March 31st was 219, which is the highest it has been since prior to Covid. Overall, our occupancy rate is 79 percent, 87 percent for skilled nursing and 72 percent for personal care. We had a total of 23 admissions over the last quarter. Our waitlist is at 114 total applicants, 94 veterans and 20 non-veterans. The approximate waitlist times are 2-4 months for personal care, 3-6 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. Jill also noted that we had set out some informational materials on the table if anyone would like to take some.

Thomas Applebach asked if we were still holding a certain number of beds vacant. Jill confirmed that we currently have a unit of 36 beds that is closed partly due to staffing issues and also to reserve a space if we need to quarantine Covid positive residents. We also have about 32 beds that are vacant because we changed our 3 and 4-bed rooms to 2-bed rooms for infection control purposes. And finally, we have 5 beds that we have out of service due to a behavioral concern with the roommate, so we are not able to pair them at this time. In total, that is 73 beds that we cannot fill at this current time.

Thomas Applebach asked a follow up question wondering if the beds that are offline are included in the 'authorized beds' number. Travis Davis replied that 'authorized beds' reflects all of our licensed beds, including those that are offline. Jill clarified that we have 219 beds filled and 73 vacant.

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

General Weigl started by thanking all the board members for serving on our Advisory Council as well as for all the support that their organizations give our veterans every day.

Senator Muth and the TAG visited SEVC and played Bingo with the residents. They took turns calling out Bingo numbers and talking with the residents. Senator Muth also brought candy and flowers to give away. The event was a big success, and all the residents had a lot of fun.

Upcoming events: May 30<sup>th</sup> will be the TAG's Fishing Derby. We are looking forward to taking veterans to fish with the TAG. On June 10<sup>th</sup>, Senator Pennycuick's office is hosting a Women Veterans Day event. You can go to Senator Pennycuick's website and nominate some female veterans to be recognized during the event at the capital. June 12<sup>th</sup> is Women Veterans Day. The Governor will also be holding a ceremony where he will be recognizing female veterans. You can go on his website to nominate people to be recognized, as well. At Temple University over Memorial Day weekend, the Military Basketball Association will be holding an event. The Military Basketball Association is a basketball league that is made up of active-duty service members and veterans. The event is open to the public and it is like their version of an NCAA tournament. We are going to try and get some veterans there. If any of your organizations would like to set up tables or attend the event, reach out to the Military Basketball Association.

We have been doing really well with the PACT Act. Pennsylvania is in the top 5<sup>th</sup> on processing claims and benefits since the PACT Act came out. We have over 1 billion dollars' worth of money coming into the Commonwealth because of those increased claims and benefits. More things have opened up since March 5<sup>th</sup>. Now if you served anywhere, anytime and were exposed to toxins, you can get VA healthcare. Please keep pushing it and have your service organizations push it.

September 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup>, we are going to have our first ever Veteran Conference in Pittsburgh, you are all welcome to attend. We are going to bring in the Federal Government, state agencies, local government, as well as private partnerships to talk about behavioral health and mental health. We will have a committee talking about homelessness and housing security and also one to talk about employment and education. We will put more information out once we have an agenda.

Lastly, if any of your groups would like to send care packages to some of the troops we have deployed, please let us know.

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

Travis Davis started by providing a survey update. Since our last meeting, the VA has conducted annual surveys at 3 of our facilities; Gino Merli, Erie, and Southeastern. Also, the Department of Human Services

conducted their annual surveys at Hollidaysburg and Erie. So far, so good with all of those surveys. We had a Department of Health complaint survey here at Southeastern. Brian will go more in depth on specifics, but they came in after hours and were here until about midnight. Brian, Lauren, and the team did a great job. Unfortunately, these things do happen in our industry, but the team responded well, and we thank them for all their hard work.

We are doing well with Infection Prevention and respiratory illness across the homes. Barb Raymond will give an update on the numbers, but overall, everything is going well.

We have had a lot of key personnel moves. Firstly, thank you and welcome to Dr. Yeung. We are very excited to have her on board. She brings with her a wealth of knowledge and experience with the geriatric population and nursing homes. Brian and Dr. Yeung are going to be interviewing some nurse practitioners this week and next week. Also, Southeastern is going to be hiring a new Director of Nursing because Lauren will be coming up to headquarters. She will be working mostly on the eastern side of the state, helping support the homes with things like policies, education, on site trainings, etc. We are really excited to have Lauren in this new role. Luke Hughes is our new Facility Administrative Officer. Luke has been with the DMVA for about 7-8 years and was one of our Construction Project Managers. Now he is going to oversee all the construction and facility maintenance for all the homes across the state. We also have an offer out to a candidate to fill our vacant Commandant position at the Southwestern Veterans' Center. Rich Adams, the longtime Commandant at that facility, retired about a week ago. He was in the industry for over 4 decades. We hope to give an announcement in the next few weeks about who the replacement is. Right now, Barry Lowen is helping out as an Interim Commandant until we fill this position. We have a new Grievance Coordinator for headquarters, Michelle Copeland. Michelle is going to work with our headquarters' team and all of our Grievance officers and Social workers in all 6 homes. She is replacing Margo Coleman, who is the new Commandant at our Delaware Valley Veterans' Home. We are excited to have Michelle on board. Finally, we initiated a formal internship program this year for graduate students looking to get into long-term care. It gives 2 students from across the state the opportunity to work for us for a year, get paid and gain experience in long-term care either at our headquarters or at one of our homes. We have 2 students this year that are the first to go through this program. We have had students in the past intern for us, but it was never formalized. We have an intern that is going to be doing an Administrator in Training program in Scranton under one of our Commandants and we have another that is going to work at headquarters and help our Project Management team and our Business Operations team. We are really excited to get this project underway and going forward, this will be an annual project.

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

Nothing has really changed regarding recruitment and retention. This still remains our biggest challenge with over 300 vacancies across the state. We are continuing with our recruitment programs, such as Walk-in Wednesdays. We are filling a lot of disciplines other than direct-care workers, but our biggest needs are still RNs, LPNs, and CNAs.

Yesterday, we had a Governance meeting. We have 2 meetings each year per Federal requirements. It is a good time for us to review all new policies, establish a charter, review all of our quality metrics, etc. We go over all surveys in terms of resident and family satisfaction. Then, we bring those recommendations and the information to the DAG, VA, and Adjutant General.

We continue to see our census across the state slowly climb and we are seeing our waitlist go down as well. The biggest change over the last 6 months is that we are able to fill our beds a little bit quicker in some of our homes. Southeastern Veterans Center still remains a popular home in terms of our waitlist, so it is a little slower to get into here. However, for example, in Scranton about 6-12 months ago it was about a 6-9 month wait to get in and now we are seeing people get in within a few weeks.

Thomas Applebach was curious to know why we are filling beds faster. Travis Davis responded that we are able to leverage some agency staffing to help supplement the staff that we have currently to fill more beds. Also, Barb and the nursing admin team has spent a lot of time at the facilities looking at bed management and making sure we are efficiently utilizing our labor resources with the beds that we have. They have done a great job with expanding the number of beds that we are able to fill with our current complement of staff. Another thing that we are seeing is there are some people on our wait lists that are not quite ready to come in when we call them, so we move on to the next applicant, while keeping them on the list.

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

Barbara Raymond started by giving an update on Covid positives at the homes. We thankfully do not have any Covid positive residents or staff at any of our homes. The homes had some minor outbreaks over the winter months, but nothing major. We also have no influenza or RSV at the homes. Flu season was pretty mild this year. We were a little anxious to see if any of those numbers were going to climb; they did not, so we are very pleased with that. Our RSV vaccine acceptance with our residents is a little over 50 percent across the 6 homes. We expect that number to increase if the CDC and FDA does recommend annual RSV vaccinations. As of now, they have not made that recommendation, but we are anticipating that to happen in the future. We did have a Norovirus outbreak here at Southeastern Veterans' Home and at our Delaware Valley Veterans Home. The homes did a great job from an infection prevention standpoint keeping it under control and no one needed IV hydration.

From a staffing standpoint, we have been busy. We seem to be having a small uptick in RNs applying. Our biggest struggle right now is recruiting nursing aides. Some things we have done to get more nursing aides through the door is offering training courses in the homes themselves as well as partnering with schools throughout the Commonwealth. We have a Training CNA position, where we bring trainees in, and they assist with various job duties. They cannot do hands-on care, such as bathing and feeding, but they can assist the nursing staff with other various tasks. We encourage them to go to school, we pay for their schooling, and we also pay them to go to school. We have had some success, but it is still a challenge to get these individuals on board.

We are gearing up for State Veterans' Home week in June. All of the homes are planning lots of fun activities, one of which includes a dunk tank. Veterans' Home week is always the week of Flag Day.

Our revenue team is doing an awesome job with the Cleland-Dole Act to help lower catastrophic illness medication costs for our residents. They are also doing a fantastic job with the PACT Act; getting revenue dollars for our veterans, getting our service connection numbers up and getting that prevailing rate from the Federal VA therefore decreasing the amount that the resident has to pay.

Construction update: we are on track with our Hollidaysburg facility. The building is starting to look very nice. We are hoping to have it complete by 2025, but we will see how the winter goes. Several of the homes have had drainage issues in their main kitchens. Thankfully repairs were able to be made without interruptions being made to food service.

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

Brian Gula started by saying that we are extremely excited to have Dr. Yeung with us. She has lots of knowledge and experience from not only a physician standpoint but from a long- term care standpoint. We are very excited for the quality of care that we will be able to provide with her on board. She is currently holding down the fort solely. We are in the process of recruiting 2 full-time nurse practitioners to assist her. The posting closed last Thursday. We had 11 applicants which resulted in 6 interviews scheduled for this week and next week.

We had our Federal VA survey in February. The survey team was here for a week and surveyed our skilled nursing unit and personal care unit. Overall, it was a pretty successful survey. We received 4 deficiencies, 2 of which were in regard to a sharing agreement which is out of our hands as it is a headquarters level issue. We also received a deficiency due to a pharmacy invoicing issue and one minor patient care deficiency due to a nurse not complying properly with our hand washing policy during med pass. In response, we have provided education on the policy to that nurse as well as to the rest of the nursing staff as a refresher and will audit to make sure the nursing staff is compliant.

We did have the Department of Health out for a complaint survey. The surveyor came in right before 6pm and she was here until midnight. They received a concern in regard to the quality of care pertaining to about 20 residents. Lauren and her Assistant Directors of Nursing sat down with the surveyor and went through information for all 20 plus residents. There was only 1 deficiency found throughout their review. We had a resident who was a new admit. We had put in place a plan of treatment, but we did not have it documented. There were no adverse effects to the resident. We did what we had to do, but we did not have it documented. Again, we will provide some education and do some auditing, so that we do not have a reoccurrence in the future.

The window for our annual Department of Health survey is slowly approaching. We will enter that window around May/June. We will be getting our quality assurance team and other departments ready in anticipation of that survey.

As Travis mentioned, we are currently rated as a 5-star facility. We have 5 stars in our quality measures, 3 stars in our surveys, and 5 stars in our staffing measures. We are predicting for our next quarterly refresh that we will maintain our 5-star status. We have some prediction tools that we use to calculate our score and our score is only going to go up on the next refresh, so we will have a nice cushion should we see a decrease.

We have a Spring Job Fair coming up in May. We utilize the ADHC since it has its own parking and entrance. It usually works out very nicely. We have seen some success with these job fairs in the past, but as Travis and Barb stated earlier, our direct-care workers are our biggest need. Recruitment assistance has been successful in getting us Social Workers, Nurse Practitioners, and Nursing Administration positions. They contact us and we let them know what our needs are, then they will hone-in on schools and career fairs to help us fill those needs.

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

Mildred Butler-Coleman stated that, since our last meeting, we received all new tables and chairs for our All-Purpose Room. We also had the room painted to freshen up the space and give it a more modern feel.

Our boiler project that we have been working on for the past 2 years is finally complete. The next thing on the agenda is to switch over from heating to air conditioning since the weather is getting nicer. Today and

tomorrow our contractors will be here to switch us over from heating to air conditioning. The month of April is always a little wonky since we can have both 30–40-degree days and 70-degree days.

We are looking into having our contractor Fitch Electronics update our overhead paging system in the buildings. Currently, if you wish to page someone, you must page both buildings separately. We are hoping to make the system more convenient and effective by combining the two systems so you can page both buildings at the same time. We are waiting on quotes to find out what the cost would be to make that switch. While we were waiting, we were able to have them fix the speakers in our chapel so that the residents can hear the services better.

We are working on a project to have our Coates Hall elevators lock, so if a resident that is a wander risk gets on the elevator, they won't be able to go anywhere. We haven't had an issue with this, but we want to ensure we are doing everything we can to keep our residents safe. Although we haven't had any elopement issues, we want to prevent them from possibly happening.

As Barb mentioned, our facility was one of the ones that had drain issues in the kitchen. After years, it has finally been fixed. There was some inconvenience for the dietary staff themselves, but the issue did not disrupt our food service or inconvenience residents. Another big-ticket item that we just had approved is that our walk-in refrigerator and freezer in the main kitchen need to be replaced. The contractor needs to come in and take out all the inner workings and replace them. The work will be starting on Monday. This is a 200,000-dollar project. The refrigerator and freezer are original to the Tilghman Hall building.

We currently have 3 live-fish aquariums throughout the facility, 1 in each lobby and 1 on our memory care unit. We have been leasing these aquariums and have had a contract for the last 5-6 years. We have decided to try something different and are getting virtual aquariums instead. We will have TVs dedicated to these 'aquariums' where you can change the 'fishscape' to see different ecosystems and different fish. We have 2 of these aquariums already set up and once we see how things go, we may add a 3<sup>rd</sup> to the memory care unit. The contract for the live-fish aquariums ends June of 2024.

We have 3 large TVs that were donated by the Veteran Bowlers Association. These were used to upgrade some of the TVs in the CLC TV rooms for the residents that have visual impairments and struggled to see the other TVs.

The newest events that we have been having for our residents are food trucks. Organizations can donate money for us to have food trucks come out and residents can eat free, and staff have the option to purchase lunch. It is nice to provide some options for staff and residents.

We have 2 students that will be recognized at our Volunteer Appreciation Luncheon on April 24<sup>th</sup> for earning the Presidential award for volunteering 100 hours throughout the school year.

We would like to thank you and your organizations for everything that you do to improve the quality of life for our residents.

Nikki Whitlock stated that Senator Muth's office can provide certificates for the students winning the Presidential awards. Sarah Klufas will forward the names of the students for the recognition.



**Comments from the Council:**

Thomas Applebach asked if we would provide an agenda or schedule of the events happening each day of Veterans' Home Week. Mildred stated that we are still in the planning phase, but once everything is finalized, we can send something out to the council members.

Senator Pennyquick provided a quick update on some of the bills that are of interest in the Veteran community. On Tuesday, the Korean Valor Act, Senate Bill 973, was passed out of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, and it will be considered on the floor of the Senate in the upcoming session at the end of April. The Korean Valor Act mirrors the federal Korean Valor Act that recognizes Vietnam War veterans that fought for the Korean Armed Forces alongside U.S Forces and are now American Citizens. Additionally, we have Senate Bill 194 that eliminates federal VA aid and attendance from being considered for any state programs. Currently your help is needed with Senate Bill 1145, which is the Veterans Sharks Bill to protect veterans against 'Claim Sharks'. It was scheduled to run but there is an organization that is pushing hard to allow the payment for consultation on claims and got the bill shut down. If anyone in the room would like to call Senator Muth or Senator Mastriano and show your support of the bill, that would be very much appreciated. We are going to hold a public hearing to help educate more members on what the challenge is with these organizations that charge to do a veterans' claim.

Thomas Applebach stated that these 'claim sharks' and 'pension poachers' are really good at working their way around the law and wanted to know if the bill currently has any 'teeth' to go after these people. Senator Pennyquick stated that the bill has some 'teeth' to it. She would like it to be much stricter, but for now it is acceptable.

**Old Business:**

Nothing to Report.

**New Business:**

Nothing to Report.

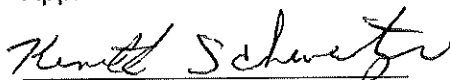
**Good of the Council:**

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 July 11, 2024, at 10:00 a.m.

Approved:



Kenneth Schweitzer, Secretary

Minutes submitted by: Sarah Klufas