

**GINO J. MERLI VETERANS' CENTER  
ADVISORY COUNCIL MEETING  
November 16, 2023**

**CALL TO ORDER**

Meeting was held both in person and vis teleconference.

Lisa Solarczyk, President, called the meeting to order at 10:00 am.

**ROLL CALL**

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

**MEMBERS**

*Lisa Solarczyk, President - Marine Corps League*

*William Smith, Vice President - The American Legion (via teleconference)*

*Bernard "Bernie" McDonald, Secretary - AMVETS*

*Robert Cudworth - Military Officers Association of America*

*Robert Smith - Military Order of the Purple Heart (Excused)*

*Russell Canevari - Veterans of Foreign Wars (via teleconference)*

*Richard Wren – Catholic War Veterans'*

*Joe Sylvester - Disabled American Veterans*

*Rosemary Brown - PA State Senate*

*Kyle Donahue - PA House of Representatives*

*Tim Cleveland – PSACDVA (Excused)*

*Lisa Kaye – PSACDVA (via teleconference)*

*Wilson Miller - GJMVC Resident Representative (Excused)*

**DMVA**

*Major General Mark J. Schindler - Adjutant General, Pennsylvania (Excused)*

*Maureen Weigl, BG - Deputy Adjutant General, VA (via teleconference)*

*Travis Davis – Executive Director, Long-Term Care*

*Barbara Raymond – Director, Bureau of Veterans' Homes (via teleconference)*

*Vito P. Ruggiero - GJMVC Commandant*

*Kathleen Ambrose - GJMVC Deputy Commandant*

**OTHERS PRESENT / INTRODUCTION OF GUESTS**

Daniel Kazmierski, Medical Director

Michael Mecca, Admissions

Beth Warner, DMVA

Jan McAllister, GMVC

Erica Comine, GMVC

McKenzie Mueller

Lynn O'Day, Recorder

Carl Weinschenk, Guest

**MOMENT OF SILENCE**

## **REVIEW OF MEMBER STATUS**

- Richard Wren is now a member of the council representing the Catholic War Veterans’.
- Wilson Miller replaced Roger Risner as the Gino J. Merli Resident Representative.
- Michael Mecca is now in the role of Admissions and Marketing at Gino Merli.

## **REVIEW OF PREVIOUS MINUTES**

- Previous minutes accepted as written.

## **REPORT OF THE DEPUTY ADJUTANT GENERAL**

- General Weigl stated that there are many people who do not know that we have 6 homes. Please share with your members and the public. She also mentioned that Gino Merli is the only 5-star nursing home in the Lackawanna County area.
- General Weigl announced that we have several new commandants and that there have been many changes in administration throughout the DMVA.

## **REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF LONG-TERM CARE**

- Travis Davis reported that the administration participated in the Senior Leadership Conference which was held at Fort Indiantown Gap. Some of the items that were discussed were new updates, IT and regulatory updates. We do have weekly conference calls, but it is important that we get together.
- Advisory council minutes from all homes are now posted online as well as the schedules.
- Veteran’s week is wrapping up and the holiday season is getting underway.
- Our staffing has increased, and we are above where we need to be. In September, the feds had upped the proposed staffing requirements. The counts do not take LPNs into account, and they do not blanket the staffing differences. There is no reimbursement tied to this. They are estimating that every nursing home across the country is going to see about a 300-to-400-thousand-dollar, annual increase in cost with no reimbursement tied to it.
- The state senate passed a bill that will allow certified medication aides to be counted and work within skilled nursing facilities. It still has to get the state house but we are hoping it will get passed. Right now, the DOH do not count medication aides in their numbers.
- We’ve wrapped up all of our annual surveys from the Department of Health, Department of Human Services and the Federal VA. We are waiting for 2 more surveys. 1 annual VA in Philadelphia and 1 for DHS in Hollidaysburg.
- Currently 4 of our nursing homes are 5-star rated. They are Delaware Valley, Gino Merli, Southwestern Veterans’ Center and Southeast. We have 2 that are 3-star in Hollidaysburg and Erie.
- Recruitment retention is still our biggest challenge. We currently have 378 vacancies across the state. Every home has an empty wing because we don’t have the staff to fill it. We have waiting lists but not the staff to fill all the beds. We are using all the incentives that we can throughout the state. We are also using agencies.
- We have on-site hiring events across the state. Gino Merli has been sticking to a walk-in Wednesday model which was implemented about 6 or 8 months ago because this event remains really strong in this area.
- We have 1079 capacity across the state bringing us to just about 70% full.
- We have waitlists at 5 of our 6 homes with a total of 275 on waitlist.
- No major construction updates across the states since the last time we met. The steel went up on our new building in central Pa.

- We have had a lot of changes in our administration. Andrew Ruscavage has been promoted to the Nursing Director. We have a new commandant selected for Delaware Valley but we are waiting for the Governor's approval before we announce that. Binal Patel, who was a graduate intern here at Gino has been hired as our Director of Admissions, working out of Fort Indiantown Gap. Michael Mecca has been promoted to Admissions and Marketing here at Gino. Kelly Smith, who has been a long-time director of nursing at Hollidaysburg, has been promoted to Deputy Commandant in Hollidaysburg.
- We are currently recruiting for a part time physician in the Philadelphia area.

### **REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF VETERANS' HOMES**

- Barbara Raymond reported that all of the homes except for Southwest, have at least 1 positive COVID resident. The most active outbreak is at Hollidaysburg. Everyone is stable from an illness perspective. We do have 1 who is in the hospital, but we do expect that individual to be returning to us in the next few days.
- We have COVID vaccines available for our residents and staff. The vaccine we have is the most recent and is rated to be 40 to 60% effective against any severe illness. Our numbers are somewhat low with 171 out of 1100 residents who have received the vaccine. With that said, we have to wait at least 3 to 4 months after their most recent infection. Over the last several months we have had about 300 positive residents.
- Influenza vaccine is significantly higher. We have 807 residents vaccinated.
- RSV vaccines are available, but it is up to the medical providers to determine high risk.

### **REPORT OF THE COMMANDANT**

- Vito reported that we have been busy since Veterans' Day and will continue into the new year. We already have over a dozen events and entertainment scheduled for Christmas.
- We had our annual DOH and Life Safety surveys. We had 3 minor deficiencies. They usually return visit to make sure that you are complying with corrective actions, this is the second year we received a desk review which is very rare.
- We are a 5-star facility. It's hard to keep that status but we are a great team.
- Our VA survey is coming up in either February or March
- Our fence project is almost complete. The digital sign on the corner is on hold.
- We have a few new positions in our facility. Sarah Butler who was our Admissions and Marketing coordinator for the last 12 years is now Quality Assurance. We also promoted Michael Mecca into the admissions position.
- Vito thanked Joe Sylvester for coming in to speak on Veterans' Day. He told everyone the door is always open to come and help out at any time.

### **REPORT OF THE MEDICAL DIRECTOR**

- Dr. Kazmierski reported that we were COVID free for quite some time but in August we began having cases. We had 15 cases among residents and 19 among staff. In September we had 12 residents and 12 staff and then in October we had 54 residents and 29 staff positive. Fortunately, we are not seeing the full severity of the disease as we were seeing in the beginning of COVID. We are mostly going by the initial recommendations, but they are being relaxed slightly.
- We started to give the COVID vaccine. At first, they were asking to wait but that was because there wasn't a great supply of the vaccine. He sees no harm in having the vaccine

within 3 months, but we are sticking to that rule. As of now, we have only given 7 residents the COVID vaccine and 4 staff members but will continue to offer them.

- Currently, we have 2 COVID positive residents and 3 positive staff.
- We are doing much better with the FLU vaccines. We have 143 of 160 residents vaccinated for influenza and 60 staff. We haven't seen any FLU cases yet.
- The RSV vaccine has been available for years, but they began recommending it to high-risk patients.
- We have been trying to significantly reduce the number of medications per day. Federal guidelines would like residents to be receiving fewer than 9 medications per day.
- An osteopathic program is coming into the area and Dr. Kazmierski and his Nurse Practitioner, Ashley Adams will be taking and educating students.
  - Rosemary Brown asked what the coverage % is for the RSV vaccine.
  - RSV vaccines for adults are such a new thing but for children it covers from 95-100%. It is expected to be very effective.

### **REPORT OF THE ADMISSIONS DIRECTOR**

- Michael introduced himself to the council.
- Current census is 162. We had 18 admissions and 18 discharges/deaths.
- The approximate waiting list for a veteran is 4 to 6 weeks. The approximate wait time for a non-veteran spouse is 3 to 6 months.
- Currently working on filling vacancies and processing new applications from the admissions committee which continues to meet weekly and/or as needed.
- If you are aware of a veteran or a spouse that would benefit from our services, please have them contact the facility.

### **THE GOOD OF THE COUNCIL**

- Maria Coles reported that staffing is a big issue. We have periodic orientations for agency staffing. We have 48 agency nursing staff to help support our own staff. If anyone knows of any nurses or CNAs please let them know about our facility and walk-in Wednesday.
- Janice McAllister reported that the resident welfare fund balance is \$157,584.95. There is a difference from this time last year, but we do anticipate the funds to increase with the budget fiscal season.
- Robert Cudworth stated that he misses the trees that used to circle the building.
- Erica Comine reported that we are following infection prevention practices. Our residents are going out and having fun again.
- Rosemary Brown reported that the senate has passed the bill for medication assistance and hopefully it makes it through the rest of the process.

There is another bill that has been proposed to create a statewide veterans home advisory board.

Please use us as a resource for anything on the legislative end.

There will be a veterans' breakfast in Mount Pocono on November 30<sup>th</sup>. A speaker will be there to discuss PTSD.

The vacancies and the staffing are a very important issue for us. One of the issues we uncovered is the fact that there are a lot of people who want to become nurse but the ability for training with clinicals is not available. They are receiving hundreds of applications but can only accept a few due to clinicals. We are trying to get under the roots of that, so the issue won't be something that continues down the road.

- Travis stated that our vacancies are mostly front-line staff. We have nursing, dietary, housekeeping and transportation to name a few. Our biggest need right now is certified nursing assistants as well as nurses.
- Joe Sylvester stated that he continues to take the residents on dining trips.
- Bernie McDonald thanked everyone. He is just finishing up his 3<sup>rd</sup> term as State Commander and War Council president and this gives him a great deal of insight on these meetings. He stated there is a legislator on the War Council, Michael Hillman, and if you ever need any type of legislation proposed or help with, reach out to him. He is available and he is a good asset for us to have. We can try to have him come and talk to us.
- Kathleen Ambrose stated that she is proud to be a part of this 5-star team. She also announced that we may partner with Penn State Worthington for their nursing students to do rotations here. We just received the paperwork this week, so hopefully she will have an update next meeting.

**ADJOURNMENT**

*The next meeting was announced: February 15, 2024, at 10:00 a.m.*

DRAFT