



SOUTHEASTERN VETERANS' CENTER ADVISORY COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES

January 11, 2024

The Southeastern Veterans' Center Advisory Council met January 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- **via Microsoft TEAMS**
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 Hon. Tracy Pennycuik, PA State Senate- **via Microsoft TEAMS**

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

Travis Davis, Executive Director, Long-Term Care – DMVA
Brian Gula, Commandant – SEVC
Mildred Butler-Coleman, Deputy Commandant- 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

Excused Absence:

Jeffrey Elliot, PA AMVETS
Doug Forsythe, Disabled American Veterans
Kenneth Schweitzer, American Legion, Secretary
Thomas Brown, Veterans of Foreign Wars
John Getz, Veterans of Foreign Wars
VACANT, PA House of Representatives
MG Mark J. Schindler, Adjutant General - DMVA
Maureen Weigl, BG (PA) – DMVA
Barbara Raymond, BVH Director – 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.

Review and Approval of October 12, 2023, Meeting Minutes:

A motion was made by Thomas Applebach and seconded by Richard Doherty to approve the minutes of the Advisory Council Meeting held on October 12, 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. Violetta Berdichevskaya. We now have 2 full-time DMVA CRNPs working in the building, along with a contracted Physician. Our full-time Medical Director is expected to start in March. Since October, we have hired 6 RNs, 1 LPN, and 1 CNA. We have been able to back down on agency staffing a little bit, which is nice because it is important to us to have consistent staff that can anticipate our resident's needs.

We currently have one resident with the flu that is being treated in the facility, as well as one resident with the flu at the hospital, in stable condition. For Covid, we also have one positive resident being treated in the facility and one positive resident at the hospital, in stable condition. We do not currently have RSV in the facility.

Vaccine Update: We have 135 residents vaccinated for the flu and 81 residents have received the latest Covid booster. The Covid booster number is a little lower due to the outbreak that we had in October. The residents who had been positive needed to wait to receive the vaccine. We are starting to administer those vaccines this week. We had a slight issue with the consents for the RSV vaccine, but we are working on getting the vaccines to those that want to receive it. Right now, we are at 62 residents vaccinated for RSV. We are continuing to offer vaccines to staff as well. We have had 4 vaccine clinics since October.

Richard Doherty asked if we are seeing an uptick in flu numbers as compared to normal. Lauren stated that our numbers are about normal and that we, thankfully, have not had any flu outbreaks this year. Lauren stated that we have been wearing masks since basically October, so we are doing our best to keep it at bay.

Report of the Admissions and Marketing Coordinator:

Jill Alwine, Admissions Coordinator, provided the council with an admissions update. Jill reported that for the last quarter, the facility had an average of 211 residents, leaving us with 81 vacancies. Of those vacancies, 11 are due to staffing issues, 36 are being reserved for quarantine, and 32 are because we changed our 3 and 4-bed rooms to 2-bed rooms for infection control purposes. Over this last quarter we have had 20 admissions. For 2023, we had a total of 76 admissions. Our waitlist is at 94 total applicants, 79 veterans and 15 non-veterans. The approximate waitlist times for skilled nursing and personal care are about 2-4 months. Our memory care unit is currently about a 20-24 month wait, due to it being our smallest area. Jill also noted that we had set out some informational materials on the table if anyone would like to take some to hand out.

Richard Doherty asked Jill to repeat the waitlist numbers.

Thomas Applebach asked if those numbers included memory care. Jill confirmed that it did. Thomas Applebach then asked if we were about at capacity and Jill replied that we were pretty much at capacity. He commented on the length of the waitlist time for memory care and asked if we are seeing an upward trend in memory care needs. Jill stated that we have seen an increase in people needing that level of care, and it is across the whole industry.

Brian added that our memory care unit is a smaller 30- bed unit. He further explained that during our admission committee meetings, the team has been reviewing the incoming applications to see if we would be able to safely care for a veteran or a spouse on a different unit, rather than admitting them directly to memory care. Brian stated that we are also looking into updating our Wanderguard system in Coates Hall. This system is used to prevent a resident that is a possible elopement risk from accessing the elevators. This would also allow us to admit more residents that are a wandering risk to other units. Jill Alwine said that they also call applicants that are on the memory care waitlist to get an update and see if they still need that unit or if we may be able to admit them to a different floor. Lauren Stenson added that we also regularly review the needs of the residents on that floor to see if they still need the secured unit or if they could possibly move somewhere else.

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

General Weigl was unable to attend the meeting.

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

Travis Davis started by saying that he will be covering Barb Raymond's portion as well, since she could not be at the meeting.

Travis announced to the council that we are going to be launching a female veteran's magazine. He mentioned that Senator Pennycuick has also assisted with this project.

The Adjutant General was out to visit all 6 of our veterans homes this holiday with several guardsmen and women. The homes threw their annual holiday parties and Travis commented that the parties felt the most normal since the pandemic started. Lots of families and children came to visit with their loved ones.

Survey Update: The Delaware Valley home just completed their Annual Department of Health survey and Federal VA survey. Both survey teams showed up during the same week, which also happened to be the week of Del Val's holiday parties. Despite all that was going on, the team did an excellent job handling everything. We also have Annual VA surveys coming up in February for Gino Merli, Erie, and SEVC.

As of today, we are at 1,094 residents across all 6 homes, this is an occupancy rate of about 71 percent. The waitlist across the state is 252, including veterans and spouses. Our census number is slowly going up and our waitlist is slowly going down.

There is not much new from a legislative standpoint since our last meeting. Regarding the federal staffing minimum update that CMS proposed, we did submit our response to the Governor's office. We have not heard anything yet. CMS is currently reading through all of the responses submitted which, last we heard, was about 10,000. On the state side, nothing has really changed with the budget. We are looking for an increase in our Medicaid rate. As of right now the General Appropriations bill has made it out of the Senate, but it is not out of the house. Travis deferred to Senator Pennycuick to see if she had any further comments.

Senator Pennycuick stated that in the most recent fiscal code, we did an increase the Medicaid rates, but it is not what was asked for. She further stated that they start the budget in the end of February, and will be looking to increase that, just based on the fact that there are a lot of seniors in PA that rely on that care. Hopefully, there will be more money coming our way soon. Travis explained that one of the reasons why we need that Medicaid increase is that when the PA Department of Health rolled out their 3-year staffing increase plan, funding was only there for years one and two. So, we need that funding to support year 3.

Regarding 5-star ratings, Delaware Valley, Gino Merli, Southeastern and Southwestern Veteran homes are all ranked as 5-star facilities. Erie and Hollidaysburg are currently at 3-stars.

We have been doing really well filling vacancies across the homes, other than direct care workers. As Lauren mentioned, we have made progress with our clinical staff, RNs, LPNs, and CNAs. But that is still the big bulk of what we need right now and that is still what is limiting us from being able to fill our beds. Right now, we have over 300 vacancies across the state. Another discipline that has been difficult for us is social services. Our VA regulations require social workers to have a master's degree. Other nursing homes and agencies in the state do not require this, but the compensation is pretty much the same. We are trying to fight this and find ways around this, because we are seeing a lot of turnover in social workers. Unfortunately, even when we try to look at using agency staffing to fill these positions, they do not have anyone to give us either.

We have a new Commandant at Delaware Valley, Margo Coleman. She has been with the DMVA for a few years and has even worked in the private sector as a Nursing Home Administrator, as well.

Construction wise: we have a lot of job order contracts going on for renovations and repairs to keep our facilities running; things such as HVACs, new dishwashers, new refrigerator equipment, roof leaks, etc. The Hollidaysburg new building project is about 20 percent complete. All the steel is completed and so far, it looks great!

We have active Covid, active Flu, and active RSV throughout the 6 homes. However, our numbers have been pretty good. Across all 6 homes, we have 8 residents with Covid, 8 residents with the flu, and 8 residents with RSV. Our numbers are fairly low compared to the general population, but we have seen a little bit of all three of these in all of our homes dating back to around Thanksgiving. We have the vaccinations available for our residents. Consent is somewhat challenging, but we are navigating the process to make sure we are getting vaccines to those that have requested them.

Richard Doherty commented on the number of vacancies across the state and asked if this was due to staffing issues. Travis replied that it was. Unfortunately, we are fighting with everyone else in the industry for the same pool of staff that has been shrinking since the pandemic. We had a lot of people retire or leave the industry and we have not seen that pendulum swing back as aggressively with direct care workers as it has with non-direct care works such as dietary, housekeeping, etc. Richard Doherty stated that his retirement community is having the same issue.

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

Barbara Raymond was not able to attend the meeting.

Report of the Commandant – Brian Gula– SEVC:

Brian Gula started by saying that we are expecting our compliance team from headquarters to be here at the end of the month to complete our Facility Performance Assessment. This is essentially a ‘mock survey’ where they review the facility’s compliance with federal and state regulations. It is a great learning tool for us to identify any area that we may need to work on to prep us for our Annual VA and Department of Health survey. They will be here January 30th- February 1st to review skilled nursing and February 6th- 8th to review Personal Care. The compliance team tries to time it that they come in to review us before our annual surveys for the year.

Since last meeting, we did clear and are fully certified with our 2023 VA survey. We were in the plan of corrections phase last meeting, but we are now back in compliance with the Federal VA. Our 2024 Annual VA survey will most likely be in February.

As Travis mentioned earlier, TAG was out to visit the facility in December. The residents always love seeing him and the men and women in uniform.

Thank you to everyone that participated in the Friend of a Veteran program. We had an overwhelming amount of donations this year. The Volunteer Office set up a ‘Holiday Bazaar’ in Tilghman Hall with all the extra donations and resident were able to ‘shop’ for some free brand-new items. We are grateful that every resident was able to receive a Christmas gift and also got to pick out some extra items that they needed.

Brian offered props to Jill and admissions, along with the nursing staff, for completing 76 admissions this past year. We reopened one of our units this past year that was empty due to staffing and were able to fill all but 5 beds on that unit.

During 2023, we filled a lot of key positions, including our Quality Assurance department and many nursing administrative positions. Our concentration for 2024 is to work on implementing some processes to improve our care and services, along with using our Quality Assurance team to really evaluate our current processes and procedures and see where we have room for improvement.

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

Mildred Butler-Coleman stated that we are almost ready to close up our boiler project. We have been working on separating our hot water heating system from our facility heating system, so we will not have to shut the heat off when we are fixing the water and vice versa. Everything will finally be separate. The system is almost online. In a few weeks, we should be able to fully transfer from the old boilers to the new ones. So far, the Coates Hall building is much better in terms of consistent heat and air conditioning.

We are working on getting an upgrade to increase the speed of our internet for office staff. The building will have an increased bandwidth so that staff can operate a little more efficiently at their computers. However, what it will not do is allow everyone to get Netflix and other streaming services at this time. The hardware has been installed for the upgrade and mapped out. Verizon will then come back in and using our mapping, install the boxes and doing the wiring between them. Once this is complete, then we will need to test the network to see how much it can take to make sure it will hold up during the 9-5 hours when there is the most demand.

We are looking into updating our paging system in the buildings. Currently the systems are not linked, so if you need to page someone, you must page both buildings separately. We had a company come in and

give us an estimate on one combined system, along with fixing some issues in areas where you can not hear the pages. We are just waiting on pricing to see what we are going to do and how fast we can do it.

As Brian mentioned, we are looking to update our Wanderguard system so that if a resident is an elopement risk, they can not access any of the elevators in either building. Then we can look into having some residents that might be somewhat cognitively impaired on normal floors in a safe manor, rather than in the secured memory care unit. Thomas Applebach asked if the system is able to track resident's locations if anyone were to get out of the building. Mildred stated that the system can tell you what door a resident exited out of, but it is not like a GPS that can track someone. Berkshire is our preferred vendor and we have received a quote from them on the update.

We wanted to thank all of the volunteers that came in and helped us with all of the Holiday events we hosted for the residents. We would not have been able to do it with out you and we really appreciate everyone's hard work and dedication!

Comments from the Council:

Thomas Applebach thanked everyone for their hard work.

Ken Nadwodny stated that he had volunteered here during the holidays and was also here yesterday for the Bazaar and the veterans really enjoyed the event, comparing them to kids in a candy store.

Old Business:

Nothing to Report.

New Business:

Mildred thanked Thomas Applebach for the donations that he brought from the collection.

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

Approved:

Kenneth Schweitzer, Secretary

Minutes submitted by: Sarah Klufas