pennsylvania
DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY
AND VETERANS AFFAIRS

SOUTHEASTERN VETERANS' CENTER ADVISORY COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES

January 13, 2022

The Southeastern Veterans' Center Advisory Council met January 13, 2022 at 10:00AM via conference call. The virtual meeting was scheduled due to COVID-19 pandemic.

Advisory Council Members Participating:
Barry Amole, Vietnam Veterans of America, President
Mary Archey, Marine Corps League
Robert Richardson, Resident Representative
Kenneth Schweitzer, American Legion
John Getz, Veterans of Foreign Wars
The Hon. Tim Hennessey, PA House of Representatives

Department of Military and Veterans' Affairs/Southeastern Veterans' Center:
Mildred Butler-Coleman, Deputy Commandant – SEVC
Travis Davis, Executive Director, Long-Term Care - DMVA
Brian Gula, Commandant – SEVC
Barbara Raymond, BVH Director – DMVA
Jill Alwine, Admissions and Marketing Coordinator – SEVC
Eve Domish, DON - SEVC

Visitors:
Todd Rankin, Business Mgr., Geriatrics & Extended Care, CVAMC
Nikki Whitlock, Constituency Relations, Senator Katie Muth's Office

Excused Absence:
Thomas Applebach, Lehigh County Office of Veterans' Affairs
Anthony Arnao, Jr. Catholic War Veterans
Thomas Brown, Veterans of Foreign Wars
Richard Doherty, Military Officers Assoc. of America
Jeffrey Elliot, PA AMVETS
Doug Forsythe, Disabled American Veterans
The Hon. Bob Mensch, PA State Senate
MG Mark J. Schindler, Adjutant General - DMVA
Robert Stone, American Legion
Maureen Weigl, BG (PA) - 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 November 15, 2021 Meeting Minutes:

The minutes were distributed to all Council Members; with no corrections the minutes are approved as distributed.

Report of the Medical Director:

Dr. Shrikanthan was unable to attend today's meeting.

Report of the Admissions and Marketing Coordinator:

Admissions Coordinator Jill Alwine reported current census of 177 residents and 115 vacancies. Overall occupancy rate is 60%. There were sixteen new admissions in the 4th quarter. The current waiting list is 157. Total admissions for the year 2021 is 39. The approximate waiting list times for skilled nursing and memory care is 12-15 months and 4-6 months for personal care.

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

Speaking on behalf of The Adjutant General, Maj. Gen. Mark Schindler and Deputy Adjutant General Maureen Weigl, Travis Davis passed along their thanks to everyone on the call for their continued support. They are unable to attend today's meeting due to prior commitments.

Travis Davis provided updates on the federal vaccine mandate which include new deadlines. All six homes will require staff to have their first dose of the vaccine by January 27th and the second dose by February 28th. Currently 82% of staff are fully vaccinated and 98% of residents are fully vaccinated in all six homes. The numbers are expected increase with the mandate.

Labor shortages continue to be a big challenge. The Commonwealth continues to retain the current workforce with competitive salaries. Recruitment and marketing efforts are ongoing. New CDC guidelines have shortened the quarantine period allowing healthcare workers to return to work sooner. We have slowed admissions at all homes due to staffing shortages. We are confident that our staffing ratio allows us to provide quality care. SEVC continues to do a great job during this challenging time.

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

Reporting on the COVID status at all six homes: Currently, we have 56 positive residents throughout our Homes, one is not vaccinated. We did lose one of our Veterans, this resident had not been doing well prior to COVID and was a hospice resident, so not unexpected but it's always hard to lose one of our residents, regardless of the circumstances.

We have 145 staff currently positive with COVID, all are stable. Our staff member that had been on the ventilator, is thankfully doing well and is still hospitalized but the outcome is significantly better than had been expected.

On to the vaccine mandate: The US Supreme Court has not ruled on the COVID-19 vaccine mandate yet, however, the Commonwealth of PA, is following the Federal mandate. Of our 1200 employees there are currently 90 staff members across our six Homes that are either not vaccinated nor have they submitted a religious or medical exemption request. We have 20 unvaccinated residents throughout the six homes.

Census across the homes is low overall at 934. We have not stopped admissions, but we have slowed admissions at all homes due to staffing shortages. Even with staffing issues and slowed admissions, staffing levels at the homes remain strong. We continue to provide excellent care and support to our residents.

We had a great holiday season! The Adjutant General Maj. Gen. Mark Schindler, and Deputy Adjutant General Maureen Weigl, BG visited the homes, along with Guardsman. They met with staff and residents, participating in numerous holiday events. The residents really enjoyed the holiday visits and special meals on Christmas and New Year's.

Construction: SEVC's adult day care construction is almost complete, however, the project itself is on hold for now. The adult day care industry took a big hit with COVID. Renovations at Soldiers & Sailors in Erie include expanding the therapy area and dining areas. Gino Merli in Scranton is undergoing a roof renovation project. There is typical structural and infrastructure work, like boiler and chiller projects at Southwestern in Pittsburgh. Hollidaysburg Veterans Home will be getting a new building, groundbreaking will not take place for a few years.

Regarding staffing at SEVC, recruitment is ongoing. We are visiting area schools and colleges. We are holding several job fairs in the spring. It is a very competitive industry. One challenge we face is that we are not permitted to offer large sign on bonuses as the private sector but continue with recruitment and marketing efforts.

Tim Hennessey asked for an update on the medical and religious exemptions not being processed. Barb responded that the exemptions had been placed on pause at the Harrisburg level while the mandate was on hold. They have resumed exemption request reviews over the past couple of weeks. We are seeing exceptions starting to come thru.

Tim Hennessey asked for clarification regarding 82% of staff being fully vaccinated. Travis explained that per CDC guidelines the definition of fully vaccinated is 2 doses of the vaccine. 82% of staff have received 2 doses, this number does not include individuals that received the booster shot. We do keep track of the staff and residents that have received the booster vaccine.

Report of the Commandant – Brian Gula – SEVC:

We filled 21 positions in the last quarter and continue to actively recruit for open positions. Also, there is a large focus on employee retention as well. We have an employee engagement committee. We recently conducted a facility wide employee satisfaction survey which provided valuable feedback from staff. We also have put together a wonderful new mentor program for nursing new hires.

COVID update: There has been an increase in staff positives. We currently have 14 staff out with covid. We have 1 resident that tested positive, he is stable and doing well and will be released from quarantine on January 18th. Chester County's transmission rate is 33%, which is the highest it has ever been. This new outbreak continues to be challenging. Thru our mitigation efforts, PPE usage, education along with our infection control team, SEVC continues to do a fantastic job.

SEVC vaccine update: 99% of skilled residents are vaccinated, only 1 resident unvaccinated and 99% of the personal care residents are vaccinated, only 1 resident unvaccinated. Staff vaccination rate is at 91%. 28 staff are not vaccinated and will need to get vaccinated or file for an exemption to continue working after January 27th.

SEVC had a great holiday season! We're holding as many activities as possible while following COVID protocols. Residents really enjoyed the holiday parties and gifts, and Christmas breakfast. We were able to hand out personalized Philadelphia Eagles Jersey to the residents. Go Eagles !!

Representative Tim Hennessey asked for clarification on the number of positive cases. There are 145 staff currently positive with COVID among all six homes and 14 staff positive with COVID at SEVC. There is one resident currently positive at SEVC. SEVC has enough space to designate the 3rd floor as a quarantine unit, which has its own designated staff. This resident is quarantined on that unit until January 18th.

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

Several of our long-time employees have retired: Jackie Barnett - HR Director with 26 years of service, Steve Lightcap – Maintenance Director with 31 years of service and Brian Millard – Maintenance Foreman with 33 years of service. Kathy Knaub has taken a promotion and is working a Fort Indiantown Gap.

SEVC has no shortages of testing supplies or PPE. We have a substantial supply of COVID rapid tests, gowns masks, goggles, face shields, etc. We have a contract with Quest Labs to conduct our PCR COVID tests.

As mentioned, SEVC had a wonderful holiday season. The holiday parties were truly enjoyed. Residents were able to gather in the dining rooms with masks on, of course. There were delicious snacks, gifts, Santa, and live entertainment. Thank you to all for your generous donations.

Additional building projects include a new call bell system being installed. Another big project is that WIFI will be available throughout the entire facility within the next year.

Rob Richardson asked if the call bell system will include the option to have nursing staff communicate with residents at bedside. Mildred stated Symtech Solutions is the company designing and installing the system. They are still in the design phase. We are not sure of the capabilities; however, we will pass that information along as it becomes available.

Comments from the Council:

John Getz asked what will happen to staff on January 27th regarding the vaccine mandate. Barb Raymond explained that staff who are not vaccinated and have not received an exemption will go on leave without pay. Then the disciplinary process will be followed thru Labor Relations.

Ken Schweitzer asked about the possibility of the next Advisory Council meeting being held in person. Commandant Brian Gula said we are very hopeful that we will have it on site. We will need to assess the situation closer to the date and decide. Will keep council members updated.

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, the next regular meeting of the Advisory Council will be held on April 14, 2022 at 10:00 a.m.

Approved:

_____
Barry Amole, President

Minutes submitted by: Patty Carfagno