



**Pennsylvania Soldiers' and Sailors' Home  
Advisory Council Meeting  
Erie, Pennsylvania  
September 14, 2023  
9:00a.m.**

**ADVISORY COUNCIL MEMBERS PRESENT**

Mr. Gary Fry, President, AMVETS  
Mr. Richard DiGiacomo, Secretary, Military Officers Assoc. of America  
Mr. Harry Stewart, American Legion  
Ms. Karen Foust, Disabled American Veterans  
Mr. Robert C. Eiler, Veterans of Foreign Wars  
Mr. William Rose, PSSH Resident Council President  
Mr. Richard Supak, Catholic War Veterans  
Mr. Joe Benacci, Director of Veterans Affairs

**ADVISORY COUNCIL MEMBERS ABSENT**

Mr. Raymond J. Chambers, Vice President, Marine Corps League  
Mr. David Price, Military Order of the Purple Heart  
Mr. Anthony DiGiacomo, County Director of Veterans Affairs  
The Honorable Curt Sonney, PA House of Representatives  
The Honorable Daniel Laughlin, PA Senator

**OTHERS PRESENT**

Mr. Travis Davis, MHA, NHA, HSE, Executive Director, Long-Term Care

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

Ms. Cheri Spacht, RN, NHA, PSSH Commandant

Ms. Deborah Cubero, PSSH DON

Mrs. Elizabeth Seibert, PSSH Deputy Commandant

Ms. Alyssa Cooley, PSSH Commandant Assistant

Mr. Nicholas Wood, PSSH Admissions Coordinator

Ms. Beth Werner, Compliance Department

Ms. Ashley Megat on behalf of Congressman Mike Kelly's office

Ms. Katie on behalf of Senator Daniel Laughlin's office

Mr. Dusty Durand

### **CALL TO ORDER**

Mr. Gary Fry called the meeting to order at 9:00a.m.

### **MOMENT OF SILENT AND PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE**

Mr. Gary Fry 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**

A motion was made by Mr. Eiler and seconded by Mr. DiGiacomo to approve the minutes of the Advisory Council Meeting held on June 14, 2023. Motion carried, and minutes were approved as written.

### **MEDICAL DIRECTOR UPDATE**

Ms. Cubero provided update on behalf of Dr. Milie:

We are seeing an uptick of Covid right now in the ERs, but it is not as bad as last year. the hospitalization rates remain low. We currently have no residents with Covid. We have one staff member out and that is why we are masking in the facility.

Per Dr. Milie he has not seen any RSV in the ER. Flu season is around the corner. We will be giving residents their flu shots. We will also be giving flu shots to the staff for those who wish to get it.

There is discussion on another Covid vaccine, but it has not been said if we will be giving it as of yet. Also, the RSV vaccine, once we know what we are going to do with that, it will be passed on to the family members to make the decision if they want their loved ones to get that.

Any Questions?

### **ADMISSIONS AND MARKETING UPDATE**

Mr. Wood provided update:

If you look at the paper in your packet dated the 1<sup>st</sup>, there has been some slight changes. On the Dementia unit we have 31 out of 32 beds filled. On Nursing Care, we have 67 out of 75 beds filled. On Personal Care we have 56 out of 100 beds filled. Our total is 154 out of 207 beds filled.



For our waiting list we have 5 vets and 0 non-vets for our Personal Care unit. 16 vets and 1 non-vet for our Nursing Care unit. 1 vet and 4 non-vets for our Dementia Care.

We also have 2 admissions coming over the next 2 weeks for our skilled nursing. We're hoping to have our skilled nursing side filled by the end of the month and also our memory care unit filled by the end of the month.

Any questions?

*Why is the Personal Care side not being filled? Mr. Wood responded, lack of interest in the Personal Care side. Most veterans that come to us are in need of nursing care.*

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

Executive Director Davis provided report:

Last meeting, I talked about our minutes and how we're going to be overly transparent with minutes. We're going to put them on our website. If you were on the DMVA website, you would see our draft minutes that were up from last meeting. We'll make our corrections and get them finalized and they will be posted. That process is moving forward.

On September 1<sup>st</sup> the Feds came out with a staffing minimum. This is really the first time ever that we've seen something from CMS. It is a proposal at this point. They're asking for feedback from facilities. The proposal right now has set a minimum for RNs and for CNAs. It's interesting that LPNs were left out of this. We're not sure why. What I think is most concerning about the federal proposed mandate is that there is no funding tied to this. CMS is estimating that the total cost of this proposal is going to be over 40 billion dollars over a 10 year period. That's over 4 billion per year if you break that down, per facility in the United States that's about a \$300,000 increase annually to providers. Long-term care facilities are really expected to bare the burden of these costs unless payers step up with increases in reimbursements. With that being said, we are a different animal in the game. This will affect us to some degree, but our staffing numbers are strong. We're not concerned that we're not going to be able to meet this but overall, for the industry this is a big concern for providers. We're seeing providers close their doors right now. The number of nursing facilities in Pennsylvania has gone down in the last 2 years. We're anticipating seeing more closures. Where I think it may affect us is, it's going to get even more competitive for healthcare workers. As you all know, those \$10,000, \$20,000 bonuses we see on billboards, we can't compete with that. We have to do a good job at retaining the staff we have as we look for more ideas on how to recruit and work on retention.

The state budget fiscal code. If you remember earlier this year, we talked about how the PA Department of Health had their own staffing minimums they put out last year. We're going into year 2 of that. We were waiting for the state budget to come out, hoping that there would be an increase. There really hasn't been anything significant. We're waiting to see if it's anything the fiscal code is going to address. I think it's highly doubtful that we'll see much of an increase. I also think it's doubtful that we'll see an appeal for what their proposing for us to be doing in year 2. Right now, we're okay. We're in position to meet the year 2 minimums, but a lot of providers out there are not.

*How do the state minimums compare to the federal minimums? Executive Director Davis responded, there different and every provider is going to be a little bit different with the federal mandate. There looking at acuity right now. The calculations aren't the same. We're waiting to see how Pennsylvania is going to respond. Are they maybe going to drop*

*theirs and go just towards the federal mandate, are they going to keep theirs as it is right now. We really don't know. It's interesting right now and I think that is why the Feds are looking for feedback from providers.*

*Are the state numbers higher than the Feds? Director Raymond responded right now, yes, because there is no federal requirement right now. We're surveyed and have to follow the VA regs as well, the VA is 2.3 hours per patient per day. Pennsylvania is 2.87 hours per patient per day. The CMS currently does not have any sort of number. What the discussion is, there trying to talk from going from zero, no minimum, to 4.1 hours per patient per day.*

Executive Director Davis then stated, the 4.1 would be above where Pennsylvania has it. Right now, when we're going into 2024, that will be year 2 of the PA Department of Health and that will bump us up to a 3.2. To give you an idea of where we are at across all of our Homes, we're usually about a 3.8 to a 4.1 on average so again, we're okay, but as you know, we also have empty beds that we can't fill because we don't have the staff to do it.

All of our annual Department of Health surveys across all 6 of our campuses have now been complete. We have 1 more VA annual survey to complete in Philadelphia. We have 2 more Department of Human Services, they survey our Personal Care Homes.

Currently out of the 6 Homes we have 5 5-star facilities. We have 1 4-star facility in Hollidaysburg. We are anticipating Erie to drop from their immediate jeopardy that we talked about last meeting. We don't know where they're going to drop quite yet. They will probably drop to a 3 or a 4. What we're working on with our quality team right now is to bump up 1 star in our quality rating which should keep Erie around a 4-star until that immediate jeopardy tag falls off. It takes the tags about 2 years to fall off totally. Its point based. We're getting hit with the most points in year 1. Year 2 it decreases. We'll get back to a 5-star, but it will take a little bit of time.

*Did we appeal that? Executive Director Travis responded, yes. It's a federal and it's a State. We fought the fight as long as we could until it came to a point where it was going to be more costly to us to continue and we knew the outcome was not going to be favorable. It's really hard to overturn a deficiency like that. What we found interesting, looking at immediate jeopardies, we're seeing quite more of this and we don't know why the Department of Health is issuing more. We got some data to share with the group. Starting at 2020 Department of Health issued 19 immediate jeopardies. The following year in 2021 they doubled that number. In 2022 there was a 50% increase. In year to date they are on pace to do even more. Year after year they are issuing more immediate jeopardies. We've asked them why, is there any correlation, they aren't giving us any answers on that.*

We're doing really well with admissions. We started the year with around 940. We're at about 1,077 overall for all 6 campuses. We just eclipsed the 70% occupancy mark. We still have some room to grow. Our short-term goal right now is 75%. We added a lot of residents across various locations, but I think most significantly in the next month or so, in Pittsburgh were adding about 12 additional residents which will really help their waitlist. Overall waitlist for the State, we're around 239. That's 189 veterans and 59 spouses.

Our new building in Hollidaysburg is still making progress there.

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

Director Raymond provided report:



Covid numbers, we currently have 7 residents across the 6 Homes. We have positive residents at our Hollidaysburg, Southeast, Southwest and Delaware Valley facilities. We have positive staff members at our Hollidaysburg, Soldiers' and Sailors' and Southeast facilities and we have a pending person at our Southwest facility. Currently no influenza at any of the 6 Homes. We will be starting the influenza vaccines. Most of the Homes have them onsite. Most are just waiting for consents to get back and educations. We have to educate and get consents on an annual basis.

As far as the new covid vaccine, the recommendation from the CDC is everyone over 6 months is eligible. It does take care of the most recent BA.2.86 mutation as well as the XBB variant from the Omicron virus. Unfortunately, from the CDC call earlier this week there was no timing discussed as far as if you just recently received your vaccine. Most of our residents don't fall into that category. We really haven't given many covid vaccines within the last several months. As soon as we got those on order through our supplier and they're available later on this fall, we will begin with the covid vaccinations.

There is now an RSV vaccine that is also recommended from the CDC. It is recommended for our population, anyone over 60.

We had our Gino Merli, Hollidaysburg and Southeast Department of Health surveys all back to back. No major deficiencies out of any of the 3 of them. Some paper compliance type of things, no major trends that we need to look at for any of the Homes.

The admissions form may look a little different at the next meeting. If you look at the waiting list column, it looks like we have quite a bit on there. You maybe wondering why we aren't bringing them in besides from a staffing perspective. When we inquired about that, not all of those people are ready to go. We're going to maybe make a little bit of an adjustment to those columns. A waiting list for folks who ready to come in and then a waiting list for individuals who may not be ready just yet because those numbers just look a bit off.

Staffing, we have a few key positions open. Our Deputy Commandant at Hollidaysburg is open because our former Deputy Commandant is now the Commandant there. Our Delaware Valley Commandant is vacant due to retirement. He had been with us for 20 years. We have an open Physician position at our Southeast facility that we are actively recruiting for. We just recently finished up the interviews and the offer is being made.

*What is the specialty of the physician? Director Raymond responded, no specialty, internal medicine, family practice, geriatric care. They don't need to be board certified in geriatrics or anything like that.*

Construction for Hollidaysburg is moving right along. That is the facility that is a brand new building.

## **REPORT OF THE COMMANDANT**

Ms. Spacht provided update:

Currently, PSSH is authorized 272 employee positions. We currently have 248 filled. Our total vacancies is 24. We have 1 Quality Assurance Coordinator position open which we are currently interviewing for. 4 LPN positions opens, 2 RNs, 15 nurse aides, 1 food service worker and 1 custodial position open.

There was a question last meeting of what our food service worker rate starts out at, and that is 16.48hr.



We have a job fair scheduled for October 11<sup>th</sup> from 1-5pm here at the facility. We are still doing "Walk-in Wednesdays". We also have 13 CNA trainee positions that are all filled right now. We work with HVA, a local organization, to get them certified. Of the 13, 7 of them will start class on Monday. The other 6 will start class in October. After they take the class, they will apply to get certified. We hope they will all stay with us. Those positions will then open again, and we will fill them until we get our CNA positions filled.

We are approaching our survey window. Our survey window opens for the VA Department of Health and Department of Human Services between February and March of 2024. Currently this week, we have our Facility Performance Assessment going on which is a mock survey we do with headquarters here for our facility. They're doing our Nursing Home side this week and Personal Care side next week. That helps us to prepare and lets us know what we need to be working on going forward.

The VA survey we had for this year is coming to an end. The final audit will be submitted this month.

The DHS survey we had for 2023 was approved and we are in compliance.

The DOH survey from May of 2023 is completed and the final audit will be completed for October of 2023.

There has been discussion of the naming of the bridge outback. I will let Mr. Will Rose talk further on that.

We're still waiting for devices for the nurse call bell system. That is in the works still being implemented. The chapel renovation, repointing, masonry repair and waterproofing is still finishing up, but is close to being completed. The replacement chillers and components that we spoke about at the last meeting, they ordered the equipment, but it has a long lead time of 42 weeks or longer. We have held project scope meetings for several JOC projects on this year's 5 year plan. The replacement of several exit doors, PCU entrance roof, paving, paging system and some masonry repairs. We are also working on the plans for the Commandant House as well.

*What is the plan on the Commandant's house? Ms. Spacht responded, as we discussed last meeting, there was a question about the Commandant's house and what we were doing. We're still working on that.*

*It hasn't been decided to be torn down yet? Ms. Spacht responded, there is still discussion of that, as well as, if it is torn down, what we would do with that space.*

*Is there any update on the pavilion? Ms. Spacht responded, that is part of what is incorporated into the Commandant's house area. We're working on seeing what direction we're going to go with all of that. Requested Greg/Mike Follow up.*

We are currently celebrating housekeeping appreciation this week. We are looking forward to the holiday season, we have a lot planned.

## **COMPLIANCE REPORT**

Ms. Werner provided update:

We have completed all of the Facility Performance Assessments across all of the Homes. Which is 6 skilled facilities and 3 personal cares. We are back in Erie for our Facility Performance Assessment this week and will be finishing up today. We are on the skilled side, next week we will do the personal care side. That's being done about 5 months before there last

Department of Health or Department of Human Services survey in preparation of helping the facility to be prepared when they come back in again for their survey. We were in Erie in February and now we're back again.

Currently Erie has no open investigations with the Compliance Department. The Compliance Department does continue to review some contracts. Benchmark and VistaMed are being reviewed as far as contracts go. There is 1 investigation that was closed that was discussed at the last meeting is exclusions checks. The Justifacts process is moving forward. It will help to verify the employees on an ongoing basis.

Any questions?

### **REPORT OF THE DEPUTY COMMANDANT**

No report.

### **REPORT OF THE COUNCIL MEMBERS**

Mr. Eiler thanked the staff for bringing the residents down to the annual "Sharing and Caring" boat ride. This year we had 498 residents. He mentioned being disappointed in the VA again. They are a major contributor to patients coming on the boat ride but now they won't even talk to us. They do not want to be bothered to bring their patients once a year to the boat ride. It is very disappointing. We cut the boat ride down from 4 days to 2 days. Next year I hope everybody will bring more people in. we work all year very hard to put this on. There are 20 organizations that participated to make this happen. I also have about 450 pairs of socks in my car to donate after the meeting. Thank you very much.

Mr. Supak thanked the Commandant and staff for bringing residents to the fish fry held at the Titusville VFW. The who came were very professional and kind. Thank you.

Ms. Foust mentioned they had a zoo trip that residents of the VA attended.

Mr. Stewart stated on Veterans Day we will be having a small group passing out cards. It will be a little later than normal, probably around 1 o'clock being that Veterans Day falls on Saturday. Also, the Christmas tour will be Sunday, December 3<sup>rd</sup> at 10:00AM. Previously, we always made arrangements for lunch here. hopefully we can make the same arrangements this year. We can discuss it later. Also, the New Year's Eve party, we'll have to talk about that and what we can do. I know right before covid we moved it to after lunch so we could celebrate New Years before 8 o'clock at night. Hopefully we can do that again this year. Thank you. **Ken and myself met with Harry Stewart, Karen Faust, and Kay Suhucki yesterday to talk about upcoming special events and included the information we discussed.**

Mr. Rose thanked everyone for their service. He stated that the Sharing and Caring and fishing trip with the follow up fish fry continues to be very popular with the residents. On behalf of the residents, I want to thank you for sponsoring those activities. He also stated, with volunteer support, the 4 computers we have with internet access for residents on the PCU side have had zero down time. they have been up and running the whole time and have not been down for any reason so we are really happy about that. Mr. Rose also mentioned, it was brought up last meeting about perhaps naming the bridge recently built outback. We canvassed the residents for names. We have it down to 3 names right now, "Veterans Memorial Bridge", "Blockhouse Bridge" and "Anthony Wayne Passover". We received suggestions from residents and the Resident Councils widdled the list down. We then had a vote on the NCU side and PCU side to decide what our suggestion for the bridge would be. Right now, we're at the point where it is back in Resident Council hands. We will put forward this month at our respective meetings, the proposals for the name. By the next quarterly meeting



you will have something from the residents on the naming of the bridge. Mr. Rose also asked for help getting reenactors in the Home as part of our State Veterans Home Week. If you come across a situation where you can mention to any reenactors that we would love to have them come in during State Veterans Home Week on anyone of the days for a hour or two, in period costume and maybe answer some questions. If you run across anything like that, please contact Ken Vybiral. **The bridge name issue is being brought up at the Oct council meetings with a vote ongoing until the Nov meetings, where the final decision will be announced. Will has it figured out to be completed by the next Advisory meeting.**

**To date, I have not received any additional contact information regarding potential reenactments here at PSSH**

Executive Director Davis introduced Dusty Durand. He is the Director of Policy and Legislative Affairs for DMVA. He was up here yesterday and met with Senator Laughlin's team to talk about things like the Commandant's House and the bridge. Dusty thanked everyone for inviting him and apologized for being late. He stated if there is anything that the Department can do, they will do their best to help support that. We are working on doing a better job at making sure we have the appointments for the Advisory Councils, and we start working on those early on and hopefully have a bank of participants who are waiting to be appointed, rather than trying to search for them when the vacancies occur. Thank you.

Ms. Ashley on behalf of Congressman Mike Kelly's office stated they do not have an update on the Federal end. If we ever need anything on their end, please contact our Erie office, I am always available. I'm definitely going to look into the minimum hours set for staffing. I will reach out to our DC office to get a little more information on that. Thank you.

Ms. Katie on behalf of Senator Daniel Laughlin's office stated the Senator wants to be helpful to the residents as much as possible but also realizes his presence can bring more bureaucracy to it, so we are trying to get that balance of where he can help out best. Also, we will try to push out information regarding the job fair so if you have anything, please send it over. We have a lot of unemployment calls we receive at our office. Thank you.

Mr. Fry stated that he was sorry to hear about Sharing and Caring. I've always thought that it was one of the nicest things done for veterans in this Commonwealth. I've been there quite a few times and I am sorry to hear that. Mr. Eiler responded that it seems like the VA doesn't want to be bothered. We contacted some of the residents and asked if they would be interested in coming and the VA told them if they go on the boat ride, they will be quarantined for 2 weeks when they get back so, they wouldn't come. We've been doing this for 35 years and usually have 2 thousand patients in 4 days.

Mr. Vybiral gave recognition to Ashley from Congressman Mike Kelly's office. She was instrumental in providing certificates after our last Advisory Council meeting in June for our Cold War recognition. Thank you, Ashley. He also gave recognition to Mr. Benacci. The county did a fantastic job this past Monday for the 9/11 memorial down in front of the library. Job well done, Joe. Outreach has been strong the last few months. We attended the VA Resource Fair, Crawford County Resource Fair, Erie Zoo Resource Fair and Rep Ryan Bizarro's Resource Fair. This past Saturday we hosted a group of Navy Chief selectees. They toured the facility and learned a little bit about us and the history here. From a resident engagement standpoint, Erie County Library Bookmobile has resumed its regular stops and visits here at the Home. We've also hosted 2 military bands. U.S Army Field Band sent and ensemble that performed here as well as the U.S Airforce Rhythm and Blue Jazz ensemble. Upcoming, we have a resource fair with Representative Jake Banda as well as Representative Merski and Harkins next Friday. Hope to see you all in November for our Veterans Day Ceremony. Thank you.

**OLD BUSINESS**

No old business to discuss.

**NEW BUSINESS**

No new business to discuss.

**GOOD OF THE COUNCIL**

Mr. Fry thanked everyone for attending.

**ADJOURNMENT**

Meeting was adjourned at 9:50AM

The next Advisory Council Meeting is scheduled for Thursday, December 14, 2023, at 0900.

Approved:

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Gary Fry, President, AMVETS

Minutes submitted by: Alyssa Cooley