

Testimony

Pennsylvanian's Veterans Home Care and COVID-19 Mitigation Protocols Public Hearing

Joint House and Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committees

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Department of Military and Veterans Affairs

Major General Mark J. Schindler

The Acting Adjutant General

Good Morning, Chairwoman Boback, Chairman Sainato, Chairman Stefano, Chairwoman Muth, and members of the House and Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide insight into the operations of our State Veterans Homes operations.

It has been over a year since the declaration of a Public Health Emergency due to COVID-19. The toll COVID-19 has taken in our communities and around the country is tragic and vast. We grieve the loss of life. The impact on the healthcare systems, the economy, our families, and our daily lives is immeasurable. The entire Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMVA) was affected by the heartbreaking COVID-19 reports at our State Veterans homes. Our soldiers and airmen answered the call to support our vulnerable citizens, residents, and communities. Like all Pennsylvania state agencies, we took significant precautions and created policies to mitigate risks and protect our Veterans' home residents, their families and our employees.

My philosophy is simple. We must mold and strengthen a culture of respect, trust, and accountability where all individuals look out for and care for each other. To do this, all people need to be treated with dignity and respect, regardless of age, ethnicity, or designation. We, the leadership of DMVA, will set the example for others to follow. We will be transparent in our action. We will not tolerate behaviors that support racism, extremism, sexual harassment, or toxic work environments. We will do what is morally and ethically right.

The past 16 months have been a challenging time in an ever-changing environment. We learned, adapted, and identified shortfalls. The agency is continually working to improve operations and actions. Sparked by an investigation at one of our Veteran's homes during the pandemic, a complete review and restructure of our Office of Veterans Affairs policies and procedures is being studied. Changes are being implemented. We cannot undo what occurred early in the pandemic; however, we have taken immediate corrective actions. We continue to assess our practices and implement change.

On May 28, 2020, at the request of DMVA, the Governor's Office of General Counsel engaged outside counsel to conduct an independent investigation of the COVID-19 outbreak at the Southeast Veterans Center (SEVC) in Spring City and the DMVA response.

The report issued as a result of that investigation speaks for itself as to what happened at SEVC during this timeframe. There is pending litigation against DMVA; therefore, we are not able to answer some questions. Additionally, some of the leadership team before you today is newly hired and was not present during the initial COVID-19 outbreak.

In response to the report, DMVA immediately implemented many of the recommendations suggested. Our six state veterans' homes continue to follow guidelines of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), PA Department of Health (DOH), and Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services' (CMS) guidance in order to mitigate further COVID-19 outbreaks. Every State Veterans Home has ample personal protective equipment (PPE) stored on-site; our staff is using the extensive education and guidance on infection control and prevention. Our State Veterans Homes developed ways to classify residents to control the spread of the virus. We have minimized the virus outbreaks within our Homes through frequent screening and testing of all staff and residents. COVID-positive residents are isolated from other residents. We ensure proper amounts of PPE are on hand and properly utilized. Additionally, we participated in the Federal Pharmacy Program for vaccinating our residents. I will focus my remarks on the actions we are taking to address the findings of the report. The three main areas of focus are:

1. Our Leadership Team;
2. Oversight of the State Veterans Homes by DMVA; and
3. Restructuring of the Bureau of Veterans Homes.

I would like to take this time to introduce our current leadership team. Mr. Marc Ferraro is my Executive Deputy Secretary, who oversees and assists in coordinating and synchronizing the efforts of our entire Department; Brigadier General Maureen Weigl, the Deputy Adjutant General for Veterans Affairs, who oversees DMVA's support of Veterans throughout Pennsylvania; and Mr. Travis Davis, who is the Executive Director of Long-Term Care. Mr. Davis oversees the care of all our residents in our State Veterans Homes. Also with me, Ms. Patty Derry, my Deputy Secretary for Administration. The leadership team will continue to provide recommendations for the Bureau of Veterans Home restructuring. Our goal is to ensure

exceptional care of our residents, and strictly adhere to quality control and compliance within our six State Veteran Homes.

Reflecting on where we were and where we are today, I want to say how proud I am of the direct care and support workers at our six homes. They are our frontline workers and are exceptional employees.

DMVA's priority is to ensure we are providing the best possible care for our Veteran residents. Therefore, we are reviewing our organizational structure to verify that appropriately skilled and knowledgeable staff provide the necessary oversight of our Homes.

It is vital that the challenges within the DMVA structure are addressed. Therefore, an Executive Deputy Secretary (EDS) within DMVA has been appointed. The EDS is responsible for oversight, synchronization, and collaboration of state-related matters. Additionally, the EDS coordinates issues involving the military side of the Department. The EDS coordinates support and resources throughout the Department and provides oversight from the executive level. To date, this employee, Mr. Marc Ferraro, has significantly improved coordination and communication in order to provide transparency not only within our organization, but with our external partners to include our military and veteran partners.

The report indicated that DMVA/Bureau of Veterans Homes (BVH) was overwhelmed and did not have staff with the requisite experience to handle issues that developed during the pandemic. To address these shortcomings, we are implementing major organizational restructuring within BVH. They include:

- 1- Increasing the number of Licensed Nursing Home Administrators to support and advise the Homes.
- 2- Establishing better oversight, communication, and collaboration both within BVH and to and from the homes.

DMVA created an Executive Director of Long-Term Care, the Chief Medical Officer will directly report to. We implemented a dedicated Director for the State Veterans Homes, and are in the process of formalizing a Medical Advisory Committee, which will advise the Executive Staff on clinical policies and procedures within the Homes.



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DMVA continues to consider and implement additional recommendations. These include crisis management; communications; and infection control procedures; business operations; and other strategies to improve our veterans, residents, and employees' quality of care, safety, and wellness.

Currently, we are at nearly 99% of our budgeted complement for staffing, but we still must utilize staffing agencies and VA nurses to supplement our staff due to COVID absences. We expect that to level off and decline over the next few months. We are also seeking funding to increase our complement to the full authorization and fill all vacant positions.

In addition, the Federal VA was also used to provide clinical assistance to the Southeastern Veterans Center, Southwestern Veterans Center, and Pennsylvania Soldiers and Sailors Home.

DMVA working in cooperation with the Office of Administration created a successful recruitment campaign to assist in filling personnel shortages. We will continue to work together to bridge the gap to ensure we are hiring the best qualified candidates to fill our critical positions.

The Department of Military and Veteran Affairs, like many other agencies and businesses, is in the process of safely reopening and finding our new normal. In doing so, we will never forget our veterans and their families who have endured the hardships of loss and separation. I also want to recognize the hard work and dedication of the health care employees and support staff who worked so tirelessly to take care of our veterans in these unprecedented times. These individuals are truly unsung heroes having served on the front lines throughout the Pandemic.

In closing, you have our pledge that DMVA will continue to make improvements to ensure the best possible services and healthcare are provided to our Veterans, residents and their families! I want to thank the Committee for the opportunity to present our testimony today. As a result of Governor Wolf and his Administration's commitment to our Veterans, we are confident that we can build a stronger Pennsylvania that proudly honors and supports our Veterans and their families.

I am continually inspired and amazed by the commitment, compassion, and dedication of the entire DMVA team. It is a true honor and privilege to represent selfless individuals who embody the DMVA!