

VA HEALTH CARE UPSTATE NEW YORK  
STRATTON VA MEDICAL CENTER (528A8)  
113 HOLLAND AVENUE  
ALBANY, NEW YORK 12208

**CENTER FOR DEVELOPMENT & CIVIC ENGAGEMENT (CDCE) COMMITTEE**  
**MEETING MINUTES**  
**March 13, 2024**

PHONE (518) 626-5507

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**Richard Loubriel**  
**VAVS Committee Chair**  
**Associate Director**

**Erwin “Dom” Dominguez**  
**VAVS Committee Deputy Chair**  
**Chief, CDCE**

**I. OPENING OF MEETING:** A meeting of the 2nd Quarter, FY 24, VAVS Committee was held on Tuesday, March 13, 2024, at 1300 in person and via Microsoft Teams conference call. Erwin “Dom” Dominguez called the meeting to order and recited The Pledge of Allegiance.

**II. CERTIFICATIONS & RECERTIFICATION OF REPRESENTATIVES & DEPUTIES:**

Certifications: Salli, Thomas, Benevolent & Protective Order of Elks

Recertifications: None

**III. MANAGEMENT REPORT:**

**Darlene Delancey, Stratton VAMCH Director**

Darlene thanked the group for all they do. She identified key factors in our \$16 million deficit that she and the VA team are aggressively addressing. Although future federal support may be stronger, it has lagged in recent years; the rise in Veterans going to community providers has had an impact. We are contacting Veterans to encourage them to utilize the VA, citing central services and much less wait time for care (20-28 days vs. four months, especially for specialty care). We are hiring three new neurologists, cardiac catheter staff in May, and have added alternative therapies such as acupuncture and chiropractic. New services also include mental health MD on the Move in the community and OB/GYN and PT in the CBOCs. There is no hiring freeze, no letting go of RNs from COVID efforts, a lot of new provider hiring (example: thoracic vascular surgeon), with strategic review of all positions.

We are in Phase II in the new employee parking lot, with IV coming soon. We are monitoring the employee overflow to patient/visitor lot to ensure compliance. The demolition of the old building has opened path to design for a dedicated female Veterans building.

Tom Salli reported highly complimentary comments from Veterans about VA care and staff, and Dom reemphasized the value of having all health service in one place.

#### **IV. OLD BUSINESS:**

- a. **Approval of the meeting minutes:** Dom asked for a motion to approve the minutes from the November 28, 2023 meeting. The motion to approve the minutes was made by Ed Mosso and seconded by Skip Diamond.
  
- b. **Annual Joint Reviews:** Please contact Dom Dominguez at 626-5507 to schedule. Reviews may be done in person or offered virtually. Dom apologized for the delay in the January and February reviews, and arranged to schedule those.

**January** – Masonic Services, Sons of the American Legion

**February** – AMVETS, Marine Corps League

**March** – Blue Star Mothers, Knights of Columbus, United Veterans Services

**April** -- American Legion, Elks, DAV, Red Cross, VFW

**September** – American Gold Star Mothers

#### **V. NEW BUSINESS:**

Program updates were presented by:

##### **Peter Potter, Public Affairs**

Peter presented an overview on the recently revamped and greatly accelerated PACT Act via a Power Point presentation that is available by request to Dom to all in VAVS reps. The general website is [www.va.gov/PAC](http://www.va.gov/PAC).

It is the largest expansion of VA services to date. The focus is a vast range (over 300 areas) of expanded and strengthened toxin exposures (TERA) that open eligibility and enrollment for care and benefits for Veterans and survivors ranging from Vietnam to more recent Middle East campaigns. As of March 5, the original 2032 goal was completed. If a Veteran can show exposure via the 10—10EZ form review and explanation, they qualify. The new emphasis is on providing health care first, then establishing service-connected benefits; the opposite of prior practice.

Peter encouraged reps to publicize this to both prospective and current Veteran VA patients. Those formerly denied should consider refile to access benefits. He again explained that the more Veterans the VA serves, the more resources we receive, the more staff we hire. Unlike in private facilities, the VA License allows us to access staff nationwide. Some delays should be expected as we hire and process so many claims, but will be worthwhile. VA policy has us screening Veteran patients for toxin exposure every five years, which will help ID cases.

## **Women's Health Center—Jamie Harrigan, Courtney O'Keefe, Christine Goodwin**

Jamie introduced Christine, the Center's new head, who said she is a 28-year Veteran, and expressed enthusiasm about their current and new programs: MCH follows mother and baby from pregnancy through one year; pelvic PT care is secure and private; lactation and menopause services are being developed; we are working on one more new hire. She thanked the group for their generous support.

Courtney noted that the 7<sup>th</sup> (3<sup>rd</sup> in person) Baby Shower will be held on March 29, with the help of many present. Jamie added that Emma Quinn of WRGB would attend with a film crew. The Center also plans a June 12 general women's health forum to honor Women's Vet Day; all are invited.

Dom asked for ideas and suggestions, and continued support, noting the extent of the activity that these three women manage.

## **Low Vision Clinic – Nina Mumby, MSW**

Nina remarked that it had been ten years since she'd spoken to the group. The program serves over 300 Veterans whose vision cannot be corrected to 20/70, and the legally blind. It is a very busy program. We are seeking a new low vision ophthalmologist, and optometrist. Nina is the overall therapy case manager, and there is one Blind Rehab Specialist who trains patients on devices and equipment. We have access to the Blind Rehab Center in Connecticut for unique long-term programs; we can enroll some Veterans who might not qualify otherwise on catastrophic disability grounds.

She stressed that the program is in real need of large I-Pads to show Veteran patients possible uses they might not know about.

## **Psychosocial Rehab Recovery Center (PRRC) – Britany MacDonald, Laura Kline**

This is a group-based VA and community program serving 25 to 75 area Veterans with such severe mental issues as PTSD, psychoses, schizophrenia, depression. We hold monthly outings like Cooperstown, Panera, the Beltrone Center, and, with Dom's help, monthly breakfasts and holiday lunches. We also have an ongoing day program.

Veterans have shown vast improvements in these areas in the last two years, plus many have gone to school, and gotten jobs. We collaborate with other peer groups, such as Equine Therapy, Nutrition, Rec Therapy, the Homeless Team, CWT.

The goals are community integration, group relationship building, improved meaning and quality of life, stabilizing symptoms, combatting stigmas, higher self-esteem and key life relationships. In short, finding meaning outside of mental illness.

VAVS could help by welcoming our Vets to their events. We can get them there during the work week, and even arrange for evenings and weekends. Suggestions included bowling, having VAVS reps come speak to program participants, and having the program Veterans volunteer. Please let Dom know of any ideas.

### **EEO –Tarita Owens and CWT/Homeless – Maureen Corbett**

Both thanked the group for rapid donations after the last meeting, and Dom for food and clothing provided. The programs coordinate to help up to a dozen walk-ins daily with transitions to temporary and permanent housing and living, and does constant outreach. While there has been a decrease in male Veteran homelessness, there has been a spike for females. Tarita presented a comprehensive list of specific items geared for ethnic-needs patients, generated via their Health Racial Equity Committee. Please use it in the future; it is only partial, and we welcome input about other products you may find. Tarita explained that the ‘star machine’ idea has been piloted to help patients reduce stress with great success, and this item would be much appreciated.

### **Fisher House/Stratton Inn – Michael Horning**

- Mike noted that the major renovations and refurbishments to a Stratton Inn room will start April 1, then we hope to proceed to others, thanks to proceeds from the All-In-One Realty golf event run by a generous and grateful cancer patient, but more donations are needed.
- \$1.1 million (\$700,000 from the national Foundation, the rest in donations) in Fisher House renovations are planned to begin very soon; four contractors did final walk-throughs this week. Over time, we will coordinate with Fisher House Foundation, donors, vendors; completion and a ribbon cutting and 30<sup>th</sup> year celebration are planned for September-October 2024.
- The House will be closed during renovations, but Stratton Inn and Hotels for Heroes will be utilized during this period.
- Fisher House needs are focused on light snacks, water, meal catering, cleanup projects, cash donations, coffee K-Cups (a Rep offered donations soon). We also need a new double-wall oven.
- PLEASE REFER TO HANDOUT FOR ALL DETAILS. Mike’s phone is 626-6919
- Dom added that Stratton Inn has similar needs, but on a smaller scale; tours and floor visit opportunities are also available.
- Dom also noted that our Fisher House recently served the family for over two months, of a Scotia National Guard airman who had been very severely injured by drunk drivers, comatose for a long period, and only recently recovering slowly and in exoskeleton therapy. We were recognized by the national Fisher House Foundation for this service.

## **Food Pantry, Volunteer On-Boarding/Roles – Dom Dominguez**

- Dom stressed the urgent need for replenishing the food pantry. We served 7,000 Veterans in 2023, with 2024 appearing to be in the 5,000 to 6,000 range. But we cannot keep many items on the shelves; please use the handout list as a guide. We also race through \$1200 a month in gift cards, with 5 to 25 Veterans daily needing them for perishable and emergency items. We appreciate cash donations, and understand that purchasing actual items is a challenge, but our needs are immediate and dire, and VA red tape means it takes us even longer to resupply. It is clear that people are on hard times and only three of 14 NYS VAs have pantries.

## **VI. ANNOUNCEMENTS AND UPCOMING EVENTS:**

Dom Dominguez, Chief, CDCE

Latest Statistic:

2806 Veteran Patients served  
23,000 Items Distributed  
236 Fisher House Families  
166 Stratton Inn  
1100 Transports

Jason does need volunteers; please see him.

## **VII. QUESTION AND ANSWER PERIOD:**

Home Depot will soon update and renovate the food pantry, with new shelving and updates.

Saratoga-Wilton Elks will hold a picnic July 28; all are welcome.

Judy announced the American Legion Auxiliary and Sons walkathon to benefit VA Homeless Veterans and Hope for Heroes, April 27, 11 am registration, starts at noon, Cook Park. She has flyers.

Tom Salli announced the Curry Road Rotterdam Elks May 5 Veterans Symposium, 1-5 pm to benefit Veteran programs: vendors, info booths, speakers, games, raffles, food, non-alcoholic beverages. Designed for Veterans, community, families, with many Veteran groups involved; he invited Dom to participate. Their recent Friday night Veteran pancake dinner served 165 people.

George Walker of the American Red Cross said that his group would again have an ice cream truck on site for VA CLC residents on Saturday, July 13, 1-3 pm, with Michele helping transport patients; he asked the group to help with musical entertainment; Chris VanDuesen(AMVETS) immediately said he might have music performers.

District 3 VFW, Marie McClumpha, presented Dom with a check for \$250 for the food pantry.

VIII. **ADJOURNMENT:** The meeting was adjourned at 14:33.

IX. **NEXT MEETING DATES:**

Next in-person meeting is June 12 at 13:00 hours, same location. Dom urged all reps to appear in person, please.

***NOTE:** Please mark this date on your home calendar. Representatives and Deputies **must attend 3 meetings out of 4** to keep their certification.*

*Erwin Dominguez*

ERWIN "DOM" DOMINGUEZ  
Chief, CDCE  
VAVS Committee Deputy Chair

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RICHARD LOUBRIEL  
Associate Director  
VAVS Committee Chair