

**Written Testimony
of
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before
Executive and Legislative Nominations Committee
Connecticut General Assembly
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Chairman Looney, Senator Williams, Chairwoman Janowski, distinguished members of the Committee. It is a distinct honor for me to come before you today as Governor Malloy's nominee for the position of Commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Veterans' Affairs. I want to thank the Committee for the opportunity to present this testimony and for your consideration of this nomination. Although I have served as Commissioner of Veteran Affairs since 2003, I appear before you today with a great deal of humility, but also with tremendous excitement about the opportunity to continue serving Connecticut's veterans and their families.

With our nation at war and the needs of the fine men and women of our Armed Forces growing exponentially each day, I cannot think of a more important time in this state's history to be serving as Commissioner of Veterans' Affairs. I can truly say that this position is a culmination of my life experiences, educational preparation and work both as a veterans' advocate and public health nurse. I am honored by Governor Malloy's confidence in me and the trust and support of Connecticut's veteran population.

For the past 45 years, I have devoted my life and profession to caring for others – as a practicing nurse, researcher and advocate for veterans. I joined the United States Air Force during the Vietnam War and served for 16 years. My major assignments were as a flight nurse both on Active Duty and in the Reserves until I was medically retired following injuries I sustained in an aircraft accident. Part of my passion for veterans' affairs and concern about our systems of care for veterans comes from being a direct consumer of that care as a disabled veteran.

I earned my Master of Science in Nursing from the Yale School of Nursing and a Doctorate in Public Health Administration from the Yale School of Medicine. Over the last three decades I have been very involved at the state and national level in veterans' issues, serving in leadership and advisory positions in several organizations. I was elected President of the Connecticut Nurses Association and the Connecticut Nurses Foundation. I also had the honor to be elected to the National Board of Directors of the American Nurses Association, Vietnam Veterans of America and the Vietnam Women's Memorial. From 1989-2000, I was appointed to several Advisory Committees by the U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs, which included the issues of Readjustment of Combat Veterans, Homeless Veterans, Women Veterans and Seriously Mentally Ill Veterans. I am currently President of the National Association of State Directors of Veteran Affairs, an organization comprised by the top veterans' affairs officials in each state, District of Columbia and US territories.

When I first came before this Committee in 2003, I identified two major priorities. The first was to bring the State Veteran Home at Rocky Hill into the 21st Century – to make the facilities worthy of the service and sacrifices of our veterans and a source of pride for all citizens of this state. Secondly, I

wanted to begin to create a statewide agency that was relevant and responsive to all Connecticut veterans. My efforts have been focused on these goals. With the help and support of many individuals, I can say changes and improvements have been instituted and we have demonstrated progress in both of these areas. However, there is still much more work to be done.

Rebuilding Rocky Hill

At the Home in Rocky Hill, we run an average daily census of 500 veterans, who range in age from their early twenties to over ninety years old. I believe the neglect of the infrastructure at the facilities is well-known: structures with original electrical wiring and water fixtures that date back to 1938, accompanied by a lack of adequate amenities – which include air conditioning and handicapped accessible rooms and doorways. Initially, the most pressing issues were to improve and modernize the living conditions for the veterans at Rocky Hill by harnessing new resources – and breathe some life into the facility.

In 2004, with the help of the General Assembly, Connecticut instituted changes to open eligibility for admission to the Home at Rocky Hill and burial in the State Veterans Cemetery for both wartime and peacetime veterans. This was further broadened in 2009 to include members of the Connecticut National Guard and Reservists who were eligible for Federal Retirement Benefits. This was accomplished with no additional cost to the State of Connecticut and relies heavily on reimbursement from the Federal Government which has increased income for the General Fund.

In the seven years I have served as Commissioner of Veterans Affairs, we have been fortunate to apply for and receive over \$30M in grant funds from the US Department of Veteran Affairs. The first grant was for construction of the Sgt John L. Levitow Health Care Facility (a \$33,823,838 project to which VA contributed \$21,985,495 and was matched by \$11,838,343 from the State) awarded in 2005 with the building being occupied by October of 2008. This facility accommodates 125 veterans and is licensed as a Chronic Disease Hospital by the Connecticut Department of Public Health and certified by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and meets the standards for Medicare/Medicaid reimbursement. The second project was replacement of the very antiquated 1938 water system with a completely new water loop system (total cost of this project was \$4,600,000 with Federal VA contributing \$2,990,000 matched by \$1,610,000 from the State). In 2010, the Department competed for and was awarded \$5.9 million in Federal grant funding under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, matched by \$3.2 million in state funding from the State Bond Commission to provide new roofs, handicap accessible bathrooms, modern fire suppression systems and air conditioning

Levitow Health Care Center Rocky Hill once had a full-service hospital but the present mission has been revised to provide long-term healthcare and rehabilitation services to veterans with chronic and disabling medical conditions. The programs and services include: general medical care, Alzheimer's and related dementia care, hospice care, palliative care, long-term care, short-term rehabilitation, respite care, and substance abuse programs which are provided by a professional staff that includes physicians; advanced practice nurses; full nursing staff; social workers; physical, speech, occupational, and recreational therapists; laboratory and cardiopulmonary technicians; and a pharmacy. I am proud to report that this year the facility was inspected by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs which found no deficiencies and received special recognition for the obvious hard work and dedication displayed by our staff.

The Residential and Rehabilitative Services Program provides assistance for low income, disenfranchised and homeless veterans. Presently Connecticut is second in the Nation in the number of veterans served in our Residential/ Domiciliary Programs. In the last fiscal year 64 veterans admitted to the Residential Facility. The average daily census for 2009/10 was 355 veterans. It is important to note that we have served over 300 veterans of Desert Storm, Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition to fulfilling basic human needs such as clothing, food and shelter, veterans have access to social and vocational counselors and case managers. The Veterans Improvement Program (VIP) provides veterans with a continuum of experiences and activities which have been designed to ultimately return them to independent living in the community. Emphasis is directed toward developing an individualized rehabilitative plan, which addresses a veteran's goals which include social work services, transitional living, educational and work opportunities and job placement. In the last three years, approximately 260 veterans have successfully completed this program and returned to independent living.

The Veterans Recovery Support Program is a residential substance abuse treatment program with a capacity to serve 75 veterans. We are the only state in the Nation to offer a residential substance abuse treatment program which began in 1989. Those veterans who are serious about their recovery from drug and/or alcohol addictions receive a concentrated program of treatment, work opportunities and community service. A clinical psychologist and substance abuse counselors staff this program. To be more responsive to the requests of the veteran community, this program was re-tooled from a 24 month program to three months of intensive substance abuse recovery programs followed by nine months of additional residential support. The rate of successful completion is at 90% or better for the Recovery Support Program. FY09-FY10 yearly relapse rate is 2.29% which is well below the community standard for recovery programs.

Homeless Veterans: As a volunteer and member of the Board of Trustees, I championed efforts to organize the first Stand Down in 1992. As Commissioner, it was my joy to return the Stand Down event to Rocky Hill in 2005 after an absence of several years. Stand Down is day-long statewide outreach to homeless and needy veterans which features a concentrated array of Federal and State agencies and providers available on campus to assist veterans in need. The services range from health and dental screenings, new clothing, haircuts and eye exams to benefits and employment and legal counseling in a user friendly atmosphere designed to cut the red tape. In 2010 over 1,200 veterans participated in the Stand Down with 60 federal, state and community agencies and 213 volunteers offering services and benefits information to these veterans. The importance of this annual event is underscored by the fact that over 3,800 veterans have received help and services at Stand Down since the Department of Veteran Affairs rejuvenated this program.

Homeless veterans continue to be a main focus of my concern. We have expanded the Residential Program to include as many veterans as possible at Rocky Hill. Connecticut is second only to California in the size and population of veterans accommodated by the State Home. The complexity and needs of this population seems to escalate each year which challenges the programs we provide. Psychiatric diagnosis, dual diagnosis with substance abuse issues and social issues require many more resources than are currently available. Partnerships with community providers and other resources have been brought to relieve some of these problems but more avenues need to be explored.

Due to the generosity of many Veteran Service Organizations and groups, in November 2010 the Department brought on-line 15 new residential beds in five, on-campus houses to provide temporary housing for transitioning veterans who have served on active duty in Operations Enduring Freedom (OEF), Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and New Dawn (OND). Renovations and program details for the Warrior

Reintegration Assistance Program (WRAP) were developed in conjunction with the Connecticut National Guard and provide a new program to assist veterans returning from war as they reenter the community.

The Office of Advocacy and Assistance

Connecticut has over 277,000 veterans in addition to the 17,500 veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan. From World War II veterans to the veterans of today, the needs of this population are diverse and varied. With continued reliance on the National Guard and Reserve troops, the traditional methods of providing services and programs to these citizen soldiers required constant monitoring and creative approaches to providing for all of these men and women. Federal spending for veterans is concentrated on USVA programs which do not reach into the communities where all veterans live. At the same time, Connecticut citizens have come to expect, and rightly so, that veterans will be cared for. Increased ties with Federal funding streams are essential for this Department to maintain services with cost effective policies. To that end, in 2006 and 2010 the Department commissioned Needs Assessments of Returning Veterans to assist us in identifying emerging or unmet needs encountered by these citizen soldiers. This is a joint venture with Central Connecticut State University. Data collection was concluded in December 2010 with analysis now in progress. Information from this Survey will assist us to evaluate the effectiveness of our programs and help inform legislators and policymakers on decisions about programs for recently returned veterans.

One of the programs that were instituted as a result of the first Needs Assessment was in response to the concerns and difficulties student veterans were experiencing as they attended college and universities in our State. Many veterans felt out of place and poorly understood in the mainstream student population. We also learned that these veterans wanted to meet other veterans enrolled in classes. In conjunction with the Community College, Connecticut University systems and the University of Connecticut, we worked with the Greater Federation of Connecticut Women's Clubs and Veteran Service Organizations, to set up 17 centers on College and University Campuses for veterans to study, receive information, meet each other and meet with representative from our office and Connecticut Department of Labor, Vet Center and Employment and Training. As a result of this effort, several veteran based organizations have been formed on campus to include patriotic and social event.

The Office of Advocacy and Assistance (OA&A) is responsible for assisting veterans and their families in accessing federal, state and local benefits and entitlements. Veterans Service Officers, accredited by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, assist veterans and their families with documentation and filing of claims for disability and/or compensation. Staff offices are located in each of the five Congressional Districts (Bridgeport, Waterbury, West Haven, Newington and Norwich) and include bilingual staff and a woman's veterans' services coordinator. Last year special outreach activities included benefit fairs, seminars, and numerous briefings for Connecticut National Guard and Reserve Units deploying to and returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. These advocacy efforts resulted in over \$5.0 million in new income and benefits to Connecticut veterans and their families. This unit also reviewed the eligibility status of an additional 1700 veterans and/or dependents of veterans in the state's 330 skilled nursing facilities. These efforts have provided a direct savings to the State when veterans on Medicaid eligible for Federal benefits were shifted to the VA benefits and funding.

The Connecticut Wartime Service Medals and Registry program which was initiated by the General Assembly in 2005 is also administered by this Division. It has been my pleasure to travel to over 50 award ceremonies throughout the State and to join with many members of the Legislature in presenting these Medals to veterans in person. This year over 5,000 medals were awarded bringing the total number of Wartime Service Medals awarded to eligible veterans to 27,000 since 2006. Additionally the agency also implemented the new legislation authorizing a process to award posthumous Wartime Service Medals to the families of eligible veterans. As a result, there are currently over 30,000 veterans registered with the Connecticut Veterans Registry.

Women Veterans Women constitute almost 20% of the military force today. In combat areas of Iraq and Afghanistan, one of every seven military members is a woman. Recent DOD reports indicate that 23% of the women serving in these combat areas have reported being raped by another military person. We continue to see women with lives broken by these experiences which prevent them from having a meaningful life. Connecticut has over 15,000 women veterans' and that number continues to grow. With these increasing numbers of women veterans, the Department established the Women's VETNET as an outreach mechanism for identifying women veterans in the State. The stated purposes identified by the women veterans include: mutual support; increasing visibility and awareness about the contributions women have made in America's military; establishing a database of women veterans living in Connecticut; facilitating communications & disseminating information about accessing benefits, services and programs available to veterans; as well as advocating for the special needs of women veterans with local, state and federal agencies and providing mutual support and assistance for Connecticut women veterans and their families. This is a rapidly growing program which promises to be an effective vehicle to identify needs and develop solutions for women veteran throughout the State.

Veterans Burial Services/Cemetery System

The Connecticut State Cemetery System consists of three state cemeteries: the Connecticut State Veterans' Cemetery, located in Middletown; Col. Raymond Gates Cemetery, located in Rocky Hill; and Spring Grove Cemetery, located in Darien. The CT DVA is responsible for the care, maintenance and development of all three cemeteries. The State Veterans' Cemetery in Middletown is open for burials six days a week and contains over 7425 remains of Connecticut veterans. The Spring Grove Cemetery closed for internments in 1964. From July 1, 2009 through June 30, 2010, 508 internments were performed at Connecticut State Veterans' Cemeteries. During the same period, the Burial Services Office collected \$108,300 in federal reimbursement burial allowances for the General Fund.

In order to improve services, I created a full-time Burial Services Office tasked with providing access to Federal and State burial benefits and assistance to thousands of veteran families. This Office answered provided help to more than 13,000 veterans and their families last year. Services provided include burial plot coordination, ordering of veteran headstones and foot markers, consultation on available benefits, assistance with interment ceremonies, processing of federal reimbursement payments and coordination of memorial ceremonies. The savings to veterans' families when utilizing CT DVA burial services is substantial, totaling over \$1,739,000 this year

Fiscal Responsibility

My philosophy has been to initiate a course of fiscal responsibility which is aimed at maximum utilization of existing resources and comprehensive efforts to capture reimbursement revenues. We have worked with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and enrolled 85 percent of veterans

residing at Rocky Hill who were eligible for VA Health Care at no expense to the state. Not only has this reduced the expense of costly contract providers, we have also been able to reduce pharmacy and health care costs without compromising the quality of our services and programs. We estimate this change saves the State of Connecticut approximately \$8 million annually.

A major accomplishment has been to challenge the Federal Government and obtain approval for eligible veterans to be enrolled in Medicaid and Medicare. Prior to this effort, the State of Connecticut was paying the full cost of care for veterans treated in area hospitals? Because any federal reimbursement revenues which are recovered by the agency are deposited in the General Fund, efforts to secure federal reimbursements were not a priority when I arrived. However I challenged myself and my staff to explore all avenues for effective fiduciary responsibility which included rigorous inventory controls, oversight of expenditures, and persistent review of our revenue recovery efforts. I am happy to report that through these new initiatives, including the healthcare facility's participation in the Medicaid Recovery and Disproportionate Share (DSH) to Hospitals Program, our agency-generated General Fund revenues have more than equaled our expenditures since FY06. As an indicator, the agency's total net revenues in my first year as Commissioner, SFY03/04, were approximately \$19,942,320 compared with \$37,334,300 in SFY09/10. These efforts have further enhanced the capability of the Department to provide high quality long-term care and rehabilitative services at a minimum cost to Connecticut taxpayers and put the care of veterans on a solid fiscal footing

Additionally, CTVA has been working with the Department of Social Services to initiate the Public Assistance Reporting Information System (PARIS) for Connecticut veterans. PARIS is a computer matching process by which the Social Security Numbers of public assistance recipients are matched against Federal databases which include the US Department of Veteran Affairs and the Department of Defense. This system is operated under the auspices of the Administration for Children and Families, an agency of the US Department of Health and Human Services. Once operational, PARIS can identify individuals receiving medical benefits and social support programs from the State of Connecticut who may also be entitled to Federal benefits and health care including medications. This match would provide information for the CTVA to identify and potentially transfer eligible Connecticut veterans from State Social Service programs such as Medicaid to VA or DOD medical benefit programs and benefits. While the savings to Connecticut is estimated to be \$2M annually, changes in eligibility and Federal benefits for veterans indicate that this is a conservative estimate.

Committed to the Future Needs of Veterans

Keeping faith with our men and women serving in the military has been a vital motivation and focal point of my work. I have worked hard to broaden the context of Veteran Affairs to encompass all veterans in our State. We have moved off "The Hill" to fulfill the mandate and the expectation of the citizens of our State that we serve all who have served this nation. In these times of great reliance on the capabilities and dedication of our citizen soldiers, I have worked to forge ties with the Connecticut National Guard and Reserve Units throughout the State to assure the Department provides the support and assistance they need in these difficult times.

As Commissioner, I have endeavored to create a progressive continuum of healthcare, social and rehabilitative services dedicated to excellence. My goal has been to revitalize the Department of Veterans' Affairs and make it relevant and responsive to the needs of our veterans. I am mindful that we have many more improvements which we need to address. I believe that my 45

years as a nurse, veteran and advocate and my educational preparation in Public Health will continue to serve the veterans and State of Connecticut well. I am committed to accountability – to the Governor, to our veterans, to the General Assembly and to the citizens of our state. Our mandate – my commitment - is to assure that conditions never deteriorate to the level of neglect we tolerated in the past and to assure that all Connecticut Veterans no matter what age or period of service receive the benefits and entitlements they have earned as a result of their service to our Nation.

Not only the men and women returning from deployments today but the heroes of World War II, Korea and Vietnam and their families are the focus of our efforts. The complexities and scope of the needs presented by this diverse population are challenging. Although these may seem daunting at times, the mission is clear. Connecticut has been caring for veterans since 1863. There is no question that the people of our State expect the Department of Veterans' Affairs to strive to assure that the men and women who sacrifice in defense of this nation receive the respect, help and support they so richly deserve. I welcome the opportunity to continue this mission.

This concludes my opening testimony. I will be very happy to answer any questions that you may have.

