



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' AFFAIRS

287 West Street
Rocky Hill, Connecticut 06067

TESTIMONY

Connecticut Department of Veterans' Affairs Presented to the Program Review and Investigation Committee March 5, 2015

Senator Fonfara, Representative Carpino and distinguished members of the Program Review and Investigation Committee, I am Tammy Marzik, Executive Assistant to the Commissioner of Veterans' Affairs, and I am pleased to offer testimony today on Raised Bill No. 6855. At this time, we are awaiting the arrival of our new Commissioner, Sean Connolly, who will be joining us on March 16, 2015. Therefore, I would like to offer this testimony on behalf of the Agency as it stands today. The DVA staff looks forward to working with new leadership and will be certain to brief the incoming Commissioner fully on all Department matters.

Raised Bill No. 6855 "AN ACT IMPLEMENTING THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE LEGISLATIVE PROGRAM REVIEW AND INVESTIGATIONS COMMITTEE REGARDING RESIDENTIAL SERVICES AT THE VETERANS HOME" has many commendable recommendations. The Department continues to be deeply committed to providing the most effective programs and services to our veterans.

At this time, the Connecticut Department of Veterans' Affairs does not have in place "transitional housing and permanent supportive housing" within the Veterans' Home. The bill would require the Department to establish such housing by January 1, 2016. We support an assessment of the need for additional transitional housing and we certainly agree that there is a need for additional supportive housing. However, further thought needs to be given as to whether locating supportive housing on the Rocky Hill Campus is the best policy approach. In either case, January 1, 2016 is fast approaching, and the DVA is concerned about the fiscal and programmatic impacts of moving so quickly. We believe Connecticut's veterans could better served by a thoughtful, even paced implementation of such services.

This legislation would also require the Department to issue two reports on the progress of the implementation of this Committee's recommendations, due no later than Sept. 1, 2015 and Nov. 2, 2015 respectively. Respectfully, the Department feels that these dates should be reconsidered. As you know, the Lieutenant Governor's Reimagining Rocky Hill Working Group is in the process of reviewing and evaluating the Rocky Hill Veterans' Home. Their goal is to determine the future of the facility, including services, programs, population, facilities, etc., in an effort to best serve veterans of the future.

We believe it is very important to take the Reimagining Rocky Hill Working Group's forthcoming report into account. The Department believes that the recommendations put forward by the PRI Committee report can and should be implemented in concert with the recommendations from the Reimagining Rocky Hill Working Group. We can provide the report once it is finalized.

Furthermore, the Department would be happy to provide updates to the General Assembly and the PRI Committee as the Working Group's recommendations are implemented.

The Department applauds and welcomes the Committee's recommendation encouraging residents' involvement in the improvement to services at the DVA facility through various programs (i.e. recreational, residential or rehabilitative). However, it must be mindful that the DVA's mission includes the estimated 270,000 Connecticut veterans who do not reside at the Rocky Hill Veterans' Home. With that in mind, we recommend that the Department publish an annual report highlighting the expenditures from the IGWF and the contributions those dollars have made, not only at the Rocky Hill Facility, but to all veterans in Connecticut. The DVA would be happy to provide each veteran residing or receiving services at the Rocky Hill facility with a copy of such a report.

The Department would also like to offer, respectfully, a technical alteration to the proposed legislation, regarding the Board of Trustees (BOT). As the language stands now, Sec. 4(a) seems to strip the Commissioner of her/his voting rights as a member of the BOT. We believe this was unintentional, but we wanted to bring it to the Committee's attention.

We would also like to offer alternatives to the instatement of veteran residents as permanent sitting members of the BOT. Under current state statute, the BOT is required to make all quarterly meetings open to the public; therefore, all residents are invited to attend those meetings. We recognize that these meetings have been held inconsistently in the past. However, the Department believes that the Committee's recommended changes to the BOT will help ensure that these meetings will be held regularly going forward, offering all veterans the option to attend and address any concerns or suggestions they may have. If it is indeed mandated that veteran residents sit on the BOT, we would suggest designating the President of the Veterans Council as a non-voting member of the board. This would afford the residents the ability to provide status and information updates and to address any unresolved issues.

Alternately, the Committee could create a "Standing Committee" within the BOT to receive suggestions and complaints from residents and to investigate and make recommendations to the full BOT. The full BOT will make final decisions and communicate those decisions to residents.

We would also suggest that for the ten members of the BOT appointed by the Governor, four (4) seats should be filled with four different federally chartered veteran service organizations (there are currently 8 such organizations). We suggest that they serve a two year term and then the other four federally chartered veteran service organizations will be represented on the BOT for the following two years. This rotation would continue in future years. We believe that having our veteran organizations at the table is necessary to the success of our Department and key in disseminating information to all veterans in Connecticut.

The Department of Veterans' Affairs thanks you for the opportunity to submit testimony. We are dedicated to the future of the Rocky Hill facility, and to improving the lives of our current and future veterans. We are happy to address any and all questions you may have.