

## **Meeting Minutes**

### **West Suburban Veterans District – May 6, 2025**

Location: Wayland Town Hall and Zoom Meeting ID 213 986 181 148 5

Present: Dan O'Neill, Michael McCall, Leon Gaumond, Meghan Jop, Kate Fitzpatrick, Katie King, and Chris Coleman

Also present: Lina Arena-DeRosa, Richard Turner, Paul Rufo, Ted Prorok, and Sandra Wong

Call to order: Meeting called to order at 2:02 pm.

#### **1. Minutes**

The Board voted unanimously to approve the minutes of the December 18, 2024 meeting.

#### **2. Welcome and District Operational Summary**

Dan O'Neill started as Director of Veteran's Services on March 17, 2025. Each community has offered support in getting him acclimated in his new role. The COAs in each town have been very helpful and in addition, three Vietnam Veterans have been there to guide Dan along the way – Richard Turner, Paul Rufo, and Ted Prorok.

- Per census records, there are 2,121 veterans in our district out of 250,000 across Massachusetts. 68% are aged 76 and older. Only 8% are 45 and younger. Fewer than 5% are Chapter 115. Only 8 veterans in WSVD are receiving benefits.
- In seven weeks' time, Dan has had 44 unique engagements with specific requests.
- 21 cases have been resolved/closed.
- Twice as many are disability and healthcare inquiries.
- Volume of requests per town commensurate with town size.

#### **3. Implementing Organizational Review Recommendations**

*Add systems for managing veteran engagements and measuring impact.*

- Created shared Outlook calendar
- Developed engagement tool in Excel
- Measuring volume, need type, close rate

*Increase in-person presence in towns*

- Interviewing for Deputy Director
  - Two candidates are in final review
- Desire for Deputy Director to double physical presence

- Dan and the Deputy Director will be on an alternate schedule, so they will not be in the same town on the same day. Each town will have a VSO present two days per week, barring space constraints.

*Simplify district communications through one, central website*

- Identified and priced solution – \$5.5K initially, \$900 subsequent annual cost
  - Motion was approved to create a central WSVD website and link each community's veteran's page.

*Increase proactive outreach and programming to drive community and awareness of benefits*

- Work to be done; requires planning
  - The Norfolk County Sheriff's Office is conducting "Home to Home Heroes" Program in which volunteers go door to door to deliver packets of information to veterans. Distribution dates need to be scheduled for Needham, Wellesley and Westwood
- District-wide book signing of *Launching Liberty* to be held at The CATH in Needham on Aug. 25.

*Formalize board meeting schedule – 6 times per year*

- Dan proposed meeting quarterly. Four meetings will allow more time to be devoted to the veterans. There will be more to discuss if the meetings are spaced out every three months instead of two. Kate suggested choosing all four dates in advance. It was agreed that the meeting dates would be planned ahead and that the locations would continue to rotate. Whichever town does not host a meeting in the calendar year will be the first to do so in the following calendar year.

#### **4. Notable Town Updates**

District-wide

- *Launching Liberty* reading at The Center at the Heights, 1pm August 25
- Benefits information to be distributed to Veterans in Norfolk County via partnership with the Norfolk County Sheriff's Office

Needham

- Veterans tax work off program, vote on May 12

Wayland

- Organizing Veteran's panel for Veteran's Day as part of town's 250<sup>th</sup> celebration

Wellesley

- Flag retirement box moved to Town Hall lobby
- Select Board approved the doubling of the property tax abatement for veterans with service-connected disabilities and approved annual cost-of-living increases

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Westwood

- May 19 Select Board vote to double property tax abatement for veterans with service-connected disabilities

## 5. **Veteran and Citizen Comment**

Richard Turner, Wayland, Vietnam War Veteran

- Richard received an excise tax exemption due to the HERO Act, which went into effect in August 2024 (veterans with a service-connected disability are also eligible for registration and license renewal fee waivers). He has been busy ensuring that veterans' graves in Wayland are properly cared for.

Ted Prorok, Needham, Vietnam War Veteran

- Ted also received an excise tax exemption, which is a state exemption, so it is very easy to obtain. Effective fiscal year 2026, municipalities can adopt property tax exemptions. On May 12<sup>th</sup> Needham will vote for a Veteran Tax Work-off program. He feels there are too many eligibility restrictions regarding assets/income. He has been advocating for a Community Preservation Act exemption.

Paul Rufo, Wayland, Vietnam War Veteran

- Paul suspects the actual number of veterans in his town and other towns in the district to be higher than what's captured by the census since people are choosing to self-report.

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The hybrid meeting was adjourned at 3:02 pm.