



**THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' SERVICES
600 WASHINGTON STREET, 7TH FLOOR
BOSTON, MA 02111
TEL: (617) 210-5480 FAX: (617) 210-5883 TTY: (617) 210-5883
WWW.MASS.GOV/VETERANS**

CHARLES D. BAKER
Governor

MARYLOU SUDDERS
Secretary, EOHHS

KARYN E. POLITO
Lieutenant Governor

Cheryl Lussier Poppe
Secretary, DVS

**Testimony of Cheryl Lussier Poppe, Secretary
Department of Veterans' Services
Joint Hearing of the House and Senate Committees on Ways and Means
March 30, 2021**

Introduction by Secretary Poppe

Good afternoon Representative Vargas, Senator Rush, and distinguished members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means. My name is Cheryl Lussier Poppe and I am the Secretary of the Department of Veterans' Services. I am joined here today by Superintendent Eric Johnson from the Chelsea Soldiers' Home and Interim Superintendent Michael Lazo from the Holyoke Soldiers' Home. I want to thank the Chairs and the members for this opportunity to address you today and answer your questions about Governor Baker's FY2022 House1 budget proposal for the Department of Veterans' Services (DVS) and the Soldiers' Homes.

We are grateful that the Baker-Polito Administration and the Legislature have afforded our Department the necessary support to continue to serve the nearly 298,000 Massachusetts men and women who have served our nation with honor. I am proud to report that Massachusetts is recognized as a national leader in providing veterans' services and benefits. The Department is committed to ensuring access to all veterans' benefits and services available throughout the Commonwealth. We continuously work to create meaningful partnerships to maximize resources and maintain our status as a national leader by collaborating with our Soldiers' Homes, municipal partners, veteran service organizations, public/private businesses, and other state agencies.

FY22 Budget Overview

The Governor's House 1 budget allocates \$ 94.9 million in FY2022 which supports ongoing programming from the Department of Veterans' Services to connect veterans with supports.

This includes a total of \$6.2 million for veteran homelessness prevention. This funding designates \$3.6 million for homeless service providers and \$2.7 million to the New England Center for Homeless Veterans, which supports over 250 veterans a day.

The outreach account is funded at \$8.7 million to provide to outreach service providers offering supportive services such as mental health counseling and substance use disorder treatment and prevention, with an investment in mental health education and training for crisis intervention.

\$42 million to support more than 9,000 individuals receiving Chapter 115 Veterans' benefits, which provides economic assistance to qualified veterans and their dependents to purchase necessities like food, shelter, clothing, fuel, and medical care.

\$30 million for the veteran annuity program, which provides financial support for 14,000 individuals who are 100% disabled veterans, Gold Star parents, and surviving spouses of veterans whose death was related to their military service. Following a policy change made in FY21, an additional group of people have been made eligible for the veteran annuity, the surviving spouses who have not remarried of those Veterans at the two Soldiers' Homes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Department will continue to coordinate closely and provide guidance to Veterans' Services Officers (VSO) to assist survivors in applying for the annuity when their Veterans who were 100% disabled passed due to complications of COVID-19.

In addition, House 1 proposes \$363,000 for training programs for 350+ municipal Veteran Service Officers and their staff, who provide community-based support for resident veterans, throughout the Commonwealth, as well as other organizations who provide specialized training to professionals who work with veterans.

Other Key Initiatives

I want to take this opportunity to highlight just a few of our other initiatives:

Our outreach service providers provide transportation, food, peer and professional counseling, case management, work and school opportunities, as well as other community linkages. These providers have helped over 38,500 veterans in the first half of Fiscal Year 2021 alone.

Our housing providers offer approximately 656 temporary beds each day in four emergency shelters and 11 transitional facilities.

The Statewide Advocacy for Veterans' Empowerment, (SAVE) program began in 2008 in collaboration with the Department of Public Health (DPH) and their suicide prevention program. The core mission of SAVE is to offer peer-to-peer suicide intervention and prevention support for veterans returning from deployment. With assistance from the Department of Mental Health (DMH), Massachusetts Trial Court (TRC), and DPH, approximately 7,000 veterans attended outreach events and presentations made by the SAVE team. 849 veterans received direct referral

and linkage services through the SAVE hotline. In addition, more than 390 veterans received active case management through DMH and TRC. During FY21, the SAVE hotline received an additional 423 calls, 125 of which required active case management from the Team. The SAVE Team also focuses on veterans who are court-involved through a jail diversion program, as well as assisting veterans experiencing mental health issues and substance use disorders. During the height of the pandemic, the SAVE Team held weekly virtual coffee talks to discuss benefits and services with any Veterans who joined.

The Women Veterans Network (WVN) was established in 1997 to serve as the central resource for Massachusetts women veterans, who comprise our fastest-growing segment, representing over 22,000 individuals in Massachusetts. As a result, the WVN has increased its outreach to provide direct services to more than half of the female veteran population in this state. The WVN provides networking opportunities and this year led a virtual conference as well as several webinars updating women veterans on changes in benefits, laws, mental health and heart health. The virtual conference was attended by women veterans and service providers to promote employment opportunities, mental health services, as well as leadership guidance and financial counseling.

In collaboration with DPH, DVS is working to develop an outreach and intervention program to mitigate compulsive gambling and its affects in the veteran community. This partnership is also done in collaboration with the local Veteran Service Officers.

DVS, anticipating remote working conditions in the initial days of the pandemic, began to work with various state and local partners, including all VSOs to streamline and enhance online applications and authorizations for Chapter 115 benefits. At the height of the pandemic, DVS was meeting at least weekly virtually with VSOs as we ramped up distribution of state funds to veterans in need. We continue to work closely with our local partners to ensure that every eligible veteran is receiving his or her benefits.

DVS has also collaborated with the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) to expand access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for veterans throughout the Commonwealth. This includes the creation and distribution of a Food Assistance for Prior and Active Service Members Brochure and a SNAP Veterans' Guide. Five regional trainings have been held by DTA's SNAP Outreach team to educate and train local Veteran Service Officers on SNAP benefits for veterans.

We have adapted to the virtual space by holding weekly virtual meetings with our Veterans' Services Officers to sustain communications on issues and updates so that we can continue efficient service delivery to our Veterans and their families.

The pandemic has shown us that the modernization of systems and communications are vital to good management. During the last few months, a concerted, collaborative effort has been underway to modernize and enhance patient record keeping at both the Soldiers' Homes. The

joint Electronic Medical Record effort continues and will be another tool that will ensure that veterans in our care will be receiving the most appropriate services and supports through timely access to medical information and records.

Agawam and Winchendon Cemeteries

DVS oversees the two Massachusetts Veterans' Memorial Cemeteries, located in Agawam and Winchendon. Together, the cemeteries host over 1,200 burials per year, helping veterans and their families during times of need.

Both cemeteries have been recognized by the National Cemetery Administration, ranking among the highest scores awarded to state-run veterans' cemeteries by the Federal Department of Veterans Affairs, serving as models throughout the country.

Thank you for your time. I urge you to support the Governor's budget request for the Department of Veterans' Services so that we can continue to support current and former service members in the Commonwealth. I am happy to answer any questions you may have before inviting our Superintendents to speak.



**THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' SERVICES
600 WASHINGTON STREET, 7TH FLOOR
BOSTON, MA 02111
TEL: (617) 210-5480 FAX: (617) 210-5883 TTY: (617) 210-5883
WWW.MASS.GOV/VETERANS**

CHARLES D. BAKER
Governor

MARYLOU SUDDERS
Secretary, EOHHS

KARYN E. POLITO
Lieutenant Governor

Cheryl Lussier Poppe
Secretary, DVS

**Testimony of Eric Johnson, Superintendent
Department of Veterans' Services, Soldiers' Home in Chelsea
Joint Hearing of the House and Senate Committees on Ways and Means
March 30, 2021**

Soldiers' Home in Chelsea

Good afternoon Representative Vargas, Senator Rush and distinguished members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means. My name is Eric Johnson, and I am the Superintendent of the Soldiers' Home in Chelsea. I would like to extend my gratitude for the opportunity to appear before the committee and testify on the Home's mission, priorities, and the Fiscal Year 2022 budget.

The Governor's House 1 budget recommendation funds the Chelsea Soldiers' Home at \$36.1 million for Fiscal Year 2022.

The Soldiers' Home in Chelsea opened in 1882 and is the second-oldest veterans' home in the nation. Since that date, Chelsea has provided the finest care and support for generations of Massachusetts' veterans. We are proud to be able to continue that tradition. The Home provides both long term care and domiciliary / supportive services for those who have honorably served their country. The mission of the Home is to provide comprehensive and quality health care services with dignity, honor, and respect.

Like many long-term care facilities throughout the country, Chelsea was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Chelsea implemented an Incident Command in March 2020 which continues to lead a centralized response to the pandemic to ensure a safe environment for residents and staff. Chelsea's Incident Command implements compliance and safety standards from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Centers for Medicare and Medicaid (CMS), the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH). Chelsea partnered with the Division of Capital Asset Management and Maintenance (DCAMM) to complete a Quigley Ward Renovation Project. This project includes renovations in the existing Quigley Ward to provide a separation of living spaces for long-term

residents, decreasing the transmissibility of COVID-19. The Ward Renovation Project has been funded through the CARES Act, and a grant application was submitted to the VA State Home Construction Grant Program in July of 2020.

The project partitions the previously open ward floor plan to provide separate and more secure living spaces. In addition to the new living spaces, care support stations and hand washing stations are provided as part of the project. The Ward Renovation project also includes modifying the existing mechanical ventilation systems to make the existing patient wards negatively pressurized to reduce air flow between private patient spaces and improving the infection control process throughout the building.

In 2016, the Chelsea Soldiers' Home, in concert with Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS), Department of Veterans' Services (DVS), and the Division of Capital Asset Management and Maintenance (DCAMM), began work to replace the long-term care facility, originally built in 1952 as an acute care facility. In September 2017, the Chelsea Soldiers' Home submitted a grant application to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) under its State Home Construction Grant Program, providing up to 65% of the costs to design and build the new long-term care facility.

In September 2018, Governor Baker, Secretary Sudders, and several members of the Massachusetts Legislature held a ceremonial groundbreaking for this \$199 million, 154 bed, long term care Community Living Center (CLC). The new CLC conforms with the most current U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) standards and will provide community-based services and supports. One key improvement of the new CLC is the ability to accommodate more women veterans, the fastest-growing veteran population.

Secretary Poppe reported last year that the VA awarded \$100 million in June of 2019 for initial reimbursement of this project. In April of 2020, the Soldiers' Home was given a notice of the additional \$28.6M commitment from the VA State Home Construction Program. With this grant funding and through the commitment of the Massachusetts Legislature, we will continue to serve Massachusetts Veterans with the dignity, honor, and respect that they deserve. This new facility will allow veterans to receive quality healthcare in a private room setting, while still enjoying the camaraderie and support of their fellow veterans and dedicated staff.

Since the removal of the water tower in May of 2019, the drilling and installation of 150 geothermal wells has been completed. These wells are just one of several green initiatives that move the CLC project towards a LEED Gold Certification.

To give you a better idea of the construction site status today, the concrete structure is pushing up to the 4th level. Interior work has commenced on the Ground level with the walls and systems currently being installed. The exterior façade is just getting underway. In the next year, the exterior curtainwall and brick will be installed, and the interior systems will get completed.

An official project website (www.chelseasoldiershome.weebly.com) is dedicated to providing up-to-date information on the project, including photos, renderings of what the completed

product will look like, and a section for the community to reach out with any questions or concerns.

The long-term care facility currently has an active waitlist of 67 veterans, which operates on a first come, first served basis. Once the new Center is opened, we look forward to having the opportunity to serve more veterans.

The long-term care facility contracts with a national survey firm to conduct a customer satisfaction survey; a sample of veterans and family members are asked to rate the quality of care at the Soldiers' Home. In 2020, the Soldiers' Home's customer satisfaction survey resulted in overall satisfaction rate of 91.4%.

Additionally, the Home currently provides independent living in a domiciliary setting for 140 veterans. Our case managers and social workers work with and respond to the needs of these residents with an eye to transitioning them back to the community. To further this goal, we have created and enhanced partnerships with community housing authorities, employment providers, community leaders, healthcare providers, and educational institutions to assist us in strengthening our residents' ability to return to the community.

As part of Chelsea's Redevelopment Plan, the Home is pursuing a public-private partnership for the domiciliary portion of its campus. This second phase of development is taking place in collaboration with the Division of Capital Asset Management and Maintenance (DCAMM) and the Department of Veterans' Services (DVS). Phase II will provide veterans in the region new and affordable supported housing.

As a result of a vote by the Commonwealth's Asset Management Board, a ninety-nine-year lease for the domiciliary will be chosen through a public Request for Proposal process. The Request for Proposal was released in December 2020 and the bidding period will end in March of this year. After the selection process is completed, the project will enter the design and financing phase, making the earliest possible start date for construction sometime in 2022. Under this agreement, a minimum of 220 units will be dedicated to support veterans with a 100% Veterans preference requirement. Of the 220 units, a minimum of 50 shall be for senior housing and 20 will be designated as supportive housing units.

As mentioned in Secretary Poppe's testimony, the Chelsea Soldiers' Home and Holyoke Soldiers' Home have launched a project team to procure and implement an electronic medical record (EMR) system. An EMR system will enable the Soldiers' Homes to increase patient safety, better support the clinical team, and improve the billing process. This process has been a collaborative effort from both Homes, DVS and EOHHS IT, and has involved several other internal and external stakeholders.

The Home frequently partners with other community organizations including the Greater Lynn Senior Services, The American Legion, the Jewish War Veterans, the Middlesex County Deputy Sheriff's Association, Berklee College of Music, and Interns from various Art programs, to provide our veterans with opportunities for personal growth. While COVID-19 has prevented

these groups and other volunteers from spending time at the Soldiers' Home, we have felt their presence through rolling rallies, cards, donations, and a variety of other thoughtful ways. The support we have felt over the last year has been overwhelming, and for that we are especially grateful.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions you may have about the Home and our FY22 proposed budget.



**THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' SERVICES
600 WASHINGTON STREET, 7TH FLOOR
BOSTON, MA 02111
TEL: (617) 210-5480 FAX: (617) 210-5883 TTY: (617) 210-5883
WWW.MASS.GOV/VETERANS**

CHARLES D. BAKER
Governor

MARYLOU SUDDERS
Secretary, EOHHS

KARYN E. POLITO
Lieutenant Governor

Cheryl Lussier Poppe
Secretary, DVS

**Testimony of Michael Lazo, Interim Superintendent
Department of Veterans' Services, Holyoke Soldiers' Home
Joint Hearing of the House and Senate Committees on Ways and Means
March 30, 2021**

Soldiers' Home in Holyoke

Good afternoon Representative Vargas, Senator Rush and distinguished members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means. My name is Michael Lazo, and I am the Chief Operating Officer and current Interim Superintendent of the Soldiers' Home in Holyoke.

I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify before you on behalf of the Soldiers' Home in Holyoke. The Governor's Fiscal Year 2022 budget, which proposes \$27.1 million to support the mission and priorities of the Soldiers' Home in Holyoke, and funds adequate staffing levels to support quality care and infection control protocols. Day in and day out, our 320 person staff has the privilege of taking care of the 115 veterans who currently reside at the Soldiers' Home in Holyoke.

I joined the Holyoke team during a challenging year, but I am proud to be here and honored to serve in my role. I was a member of the National Guard response team that was deployed to the Soldiers' Home on April 1, 2020. As the commander of Task Force Lifeline, I led a task force of 185 Soldiers and Airmen from over 10 separate units to support the Soldiers' Home response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As someone who was part of the emergency response, I can attest that we have made significant changes since April of last year. The immediate priority throughout 2020 was providing quality care to our veteran residents and building our permanent leadership and staff. In addition, we are making great progress on several large projects that will support the veterans and staff of the Home, including being more than halfway through the building-wide refresh project for improved infection control, participating in the Electronic Medical Record project, and, the most exciting and long-term project, the reconstruction of the Soldiers' Home as we plan for the future.

Once the Refresh Project is complete, Holyoke will have 128 long term care beds. In pursuit of our primary mission to provide care with honor and dignity for our veterans, we offer programs including physical, occupational, and recreational therapy, podiatry, a pharmacy department, and we will resume dental services by spring. We have a Chaplain for spiritual support and have resumed religious services. The Canteen has been refreshed and new furniture has been ordered; when complete, we will have a new electronic BINGO system, new smart TVs, a separate media room, gift shop, and hair salon.

The Soldiers' Home partners with Home Base, a veteran support organization, to help improve the quality of life and decrease isolation for our Veterans during the pandemic. Home Base has linked us to virtual concerts provided by professional and amateur volunteers. The concerts are interactive—featuring musical performances and conversation between the Veterans and musicians. The team at Home Base works with Social Workers, Recreation and Nursing to provide other opportunities for virtual activities.

The Soldiers' Home in Holyoke implemented set schedules in January to improve staffing. Our HPPD or Hours Per Patient Day consistently remains above the CMS 5-star rating standard of 4.408 for skilled nursing facilities. We continue to build our team and remain focused on continuously recruiting qualified clinical staff.

Holyoke has been working in close partnership with the Chelsea Soldiers' Home to develop and implement a modern electronic medical record ("EMR") system, which will support coordinated patient care, and ease administrative burdens.

The Soldiers' Home in Holyoke, in partnership with the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS), Department of Veterans' Services (DVS), and the Division of Capital Asset Management and Maintenance (DCAMM) has been making capital investments to address the short and long-term needs of the Home. This includes a short-term five phase Refresh Project and a longer-term Rapid Planning Capital Project to reconstruct the facility.

While the expedited capital project will address long-term facility needs, the Executive Office of Health and Human Services, Department of Veterans' Services, and Division of Capital Asset Management and Maintenance have been addressing immediate capital needs, including \$6 million for the Refresh Project to significantly improve infection control for the residents and staff. As of February 22, 2021, Phase III of the Refresh Project began on the 4th Floor. The Refresh Project is an important infection control initiative to improve the home in the immediate term for residents and staff.

As you know, on February 11, the Baker-Polito Administration filed a \$400 million bond bill which would provide capital authorization for the major project to reconstruct the long-term care facility at the Holyoke Soldiers' Home.

It has undoubtedly been a difficult year in the history of the Soldiers' Home in Holyoke. We will not forget any of the veterans we lost due to COVID or other causes, and we will carry on and move forward, providing care to aging veterans with them in our hearts, and with honor and dignity.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions you may have about the Home and our FY22 proposed budget